





MARY SCOTT

*What Does It Matter?*



*The Valentine Romance Club*

THE VALENTINE ROMANCE CLUB

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## NOTE

This is a New Zealand book and may possibly contain some terms obscure to a wider public. 'Ladies a Plate', for example, sounds mysterious, but merely signifies the rather painful custom in country districts of charging men admission to a social occasion and expecting women to pay for their pleasure by bringing a plate of scones or cakes for supper. We 'shout' each other presents, or, perhaps more regrettably and frequently, drinks. Our barristers are not, as in England, a race proudly apart, but frequently also do a solicitor's work until they rise in eminence as Queen's Counsel. People 'sawn' upon others—to borrow a word used in scorn by our Scottish ancestors—when they do not pay their way. Lastly farmers 'dag' their sheep—an unpleasant process difficult to explain delicately, but for which may perhaps be substituted the euphemistic 'tail-crutching'.

If I have used other terms unfamiliar to my readers, may I be excused on the grounds that I am what was once called, a little patronisingly, 'A Colonial'—in short, a New Zealander?



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'What does it matter?' asked Sally gaily.

Everyone laughed, as they were expected to do, because, rather surprisingly, Sally Leigh was being the life and soul of the party. People were murmuring to each other, 'Why haven't we met her before?' or, 'Where has she been hiding?'

The answer was simple enough—on a small farm twenty miles away. Not hiding, but, until tonight, unnoticed and unnoticeable to the fashionable crowd who filled Alice Moore's rooms. Sally had been working hard on that farm for three years, ever since her father's death, without spare money or pretty clothes, but as happy and gay as she was tonight. Or, almost always gay, except when accounts rendered were tiresome. But all that was forgotten tonight at her friend Alice's party, for Sally was firmly of the opinion that, if you weren't going to be gay, you shouldn't go to parties.

At the moment she was being almost overwhelmed by the caresses of a large Labrador who was, in the opinion of Alice's friends, their hostess's obsession.

Alice said in her gentle voice, 'Alister dear, do get down. You might leave paw-marks,' and her husband, Dr Trevor Moore, remarked to the company, 'What possesses him? When we bought a Labrador, we were told that one of the charms of the breed was that they didn't jump up.'

But his wife said reproachfully, 'Oh but Trevor, Alister is so *different*.' This, her friends thought, was unfortunately true. As for what possessed him, surely it was a devil, for who ever heard of a full-grown dog who still stole shoes, ate through rubber hose, carried garden rakes to his bed, and was in general a menace?

And now he had one paw lovingly set upon Sally's only decent evening dress and was enthusiastically bent on licking her face. Sally didn't care. The important thing was that Alister liked her so much, and, as Alice was her oldest and dearest friend, this was all that mattered. Besides, Sally liked dogs, as she liked cats, horses, birds, cows, and her fellow creatures; all in rather a rash, foolish, and whole-sale way. The consequence was that all animals and most people liked Sally.

It was enormous fun to be at a party. Alice Moore had come to the town as a bride three months before, and had been widely received and entertained. Sally had never been either for who knew anything about a girl on a rather poor farm miles away? When Alice visited her, she had protested that she knew nobody, but Alice had simply said, 'Of course you must come. I couldn't have my first party without you. What does it matter that you don't know people? It's high time you did.'

So here she was, being an instantaneous success, and not caring in the slightest that Alister was probably spoiling her only decent evening frock.

Hugh Davenport, watching her from the other side of the room, was surprised at the attention she was receiving, surprised and perhaps a little irritated. He had vaguely planned to introduce her to town society himself, but gradually and cautiously. It would take time, he had imagined, for people to accept this entirely and perhaps unfortunately natural and spontaneous girl, with her lack of such essentials as money, position, or even exceptional beauty. A rising lawyer must move carefully in a rather conservative town, but he would guide her footsteps and all would be well. Instead, Alice Moore had launched her with what he could only describe as a bang.

She was enjoying herself immensely, gay and laughing and friendly, and, when she met his eye she smiled warmly. She was pleased that Hugh Davenport should see her for once in a pretty frock instead of in the shabby suit she had worn at their office meetings, or the deplorable jeans and sweaters



that were her dress on the farm. Although he had met her six months ago, when he took over her business from his senior partner, he had never once taken her to a party. Now, Sally thought contentedly, he could see for himself.

Tonight all that tiresome business was far from her thoughts. She forgot all about the mortgage, the disappointing wool returns, and those unsealed envelopes that always might be receipts but were more often bills. 'What does it matter?' thought Sally, meaning not only the paw marks on her frock, but the worries that never managed to depress her for long.

It was a lovely party, she thought; or was it only that she had not been to a party for so long? To socials at the near-by village, of course; the kind that stipulated 'Ladies a plate', and which caused Sally so much labour because her plates were sometimes not a success. Of course Alister made a little difficulty because of his conviction that Sally was overcome by his charm and only less obsessed than his mistress. This meant that he followed her everywhere and that the people who wanted to talk to her continually tripped over him. Dr Moore looked at him in despair and at his wife with adoring exasperation. 'Why not tie the great brute up?' he had asked her beforehand, but she had only smiled and said, 'How could you, dear? He'll just love the party.'

Hugh Davenport wasn't quite sure that he was loving it. It both pleased and irritated him to see Sally so popular. After all, she was his discovery, and he might have expected to shepherd her a little, to decide who would be the most suitable friends for her, and so on. But he had waited too long, and here she was, already 'Sally' to everybody and talking with precisely the same animation and interest to James Lawrence, Hugh's senior partner, as to Tim Jonson, a young bank clerk.

The trouble was, he thought, that she was so incurably friendly. She liked everyone and everyone liked her. Would she ever learn to go more slowly, be a little cautious, wisely conventional? The wife of a rising barrister would need these qualities; the woman who married a Q.C. would have to be discreet; and the wife of a judge . . . But Hugh felt he could safely shelve that question for the present. The trouble was,



he told himself irritably, that he rather fancied he might be falling in love with the girl.

He was astonished at this, for Sally was not beautiful nor even exceptionally pretty; a small, brown-haired girl with fine hazel eyes, a good figure, and features that were pleasant but in no way striking. But she was so intensely alive, so incurably gay. As he walked across the room to join her, he reflected that no one in her financial position had any right to be so gay.

She did not turn to greet him for at that moment the door opened to admit a latecomer, a tall dark young man who looked as if he would be more at home on a horse than in a drawing-room. At sight of him, Sally stopped dead in what she was saying, exclaimed, 'Simon. Simon Hunter,' and rushed to meet him, positively brushing Hugh aside.

The newcomer looked every bit as surprised and pleased as Sally. He said, 'Sally, by the Powers . . . How on earth . . . What are you doing here?'

'Living,' replied Sally cheerfully. 'Just living on a crust. But you? I thought you were at one of those learned Agricultural Colleges, doing frightful research into nasty little grubs and diseases?' Then, to the people standing near, and particularly to Hugh, 'Simon's awfully clever, you know. He can tell you exactly why sheep get eczema or triplets. Oh Alice, why didn't you tell me Simon was coming? How could you keep him up your sleeve?'

Alice smiled her gentle Madonna smile and said she thought it would be a lovely surprise to both of them, and Sally went on, 'But why aren't you advising farmers and lecturing to students? You see,' to Hugh, 'we were neighbours long ago, before my father came to this part of the world, and Simon used to patronise me and say he'd no time for girls, so of course that made me fall madly in love with him when I was fourteen and he was . . . How old were you, Simon?'

The young man, who was looking rather self-conscious under the battery of eyes, smiled and said that that would be telling, and that he'd got tired of advising other blokes, and thought he'd have a shot at farming himself, and that was

what he was doing. Presently, when he got her for a few minutes to himself, he asked, 'And what have you really been doing? I thought you were training for physiotherapy. I heard that Mr Leigh had bought a farm down here and that—that he had died. I'm awfully sorry, Sally. He was a special sort of person.'

Sally swallowed quickly and said, 'He was, wasn't he? But that's three years ago now. I did start my training, but when he died I came home to try and help Matthew run the farm.'

'Old Matt? Is he still with you?'

'Of course, and always will be; at least, I hope so. I couldn't imagine life without Matt. Of course he finds me a trial and he misses Dad, but he's my sort of rock in a weary land and I couldn't manage without him. Not that we're managing very well, but never mind about that. This is a party. Isn't it fun?'

'What a pity you didn't finish your physiotherapy.'

'Oh, I don't know. It was hard and I had to swot dreadfully. You remember telling me when I was fourteen that I'd no brains? How right you were.'

Simon, who was rather young for his thirty-two years and not at all conceited, said apologetically, 'What a hell of a know-all I must have been. But it's a tremendous piece of luck finding you here. You'll be a friend for Elizabeth.'

'Elizabeth?' The tone was a little flat. No attractive girl likes being handed the rôle of friend and confidante for another, and probably more attractive, girl.

'Elizabeth Gray. Remember her? She was ahead of you at school, but you must have seen her.'

The tone implied that, once seen, Elizabeth would not be forgotten, and Sally thought that unfortunately he was quite right. Elizabeth, tall and fair and beautiful, was a person you remembered. Sally, who was none of these things, tried to sound enthusiastic.

'Of course. Awfully pretty and clever. You used to admire her from afar and I was terribly jealous. Do you still?'

'Well, yes. As a matter of fact, we're engaged.'

Sally was surprised. Simon, of course, was a dear, but

somehow she had not imagined that the beautiful Elizabeth Gray would want to marry a farmer. She suggested city life, culture, sophistication, and Simon suggested none of them. But you had only to look at his face to see he was terribly in love. She gave his arm an impulsive little squeeze and said, 'How marvellous. You're awfully lucky. And have you bought a farm?'

'No, not yet. I want to have a little more money than my father left me, and I want to find out about the land here and get more practical experience.'

'But you've always known about farms. I mean, you were brought up on one, and you managed one place before you went to lecture at that College.'

'Yes, but I want to try my hand at managing a big farm, and I've been waiting for something like that to turn up. And now it has. I'm going to manage Luthens, that big place thirty miles out.'

'Why, that's only ten miles away from our farm.' As usual, Sally was deeply interested. All her friends' affairs were of importance to her, and Simon was a very old friend. She was quite aware that other young men, notably Hugh, were hovering, a little resentful because this stranger was monopolising the new discovery, but she gave him her whole-hearted attention. One of her most endearing qualities was her willingness to provide an open and sympathetic ear for everybody. She said, 'Tell me about it.' And looked at him with that heart-felt interest that had done so much damage here and there. 'I've heard about Luthens, of course, and driven past it, but I've never been there.'

'Well, it's a station, not a farm. A big place, about 15000 acres, and has been in the same family for a long time. But the owner's son was killed in the war and the old man is ill and has lost heart. He's retired to town and the place has begun to run back. Now he's more or less handed over to the firm that holds the mortgage. They advertised for a manager and I was short-listed. I was interviewed yesterday by the head of the firm. My references and so on were okay, but there was one snag—it had to be a married man. But I said that

was all right because I'm going to be married, and till then Aunt Dorothy would come and run the house. . . . Remember Aunt Dorothy?'

'Of course. But isn't she awfully old?'

'Sixty, and going strong. As vague as ever and as shrewd as they come. Well, they said that would be all right, provided I got married in about three months.'

'And what did Elizabeth say?' In spite of herself, a little doubt crept into Sally's voice. Impossible to imagine Elizabeth on a backblocks station, more than thirty miles from concerts and plays and dances and—well, and culture, vaguely thought Sally, who was not a cultured person.

'I don't know yet, but of course she'll be thrilled. I wrote to her about it yesterday, as soon as I knew I had the job, and asked her to come and have a look at the place and to hurry up the wedding. After all,' said Simon, like all men, 'what does a wedding matter? I mean, as I told her, she won't want a lot of clothes on Luthens; we won't be going to town often.'

Sally thought, but did not say, that this might not make Elizabeth very keen about Luthens. She hoped she was wrong. She had always been very fond of Simon, and he looked so happy and enthusiastic tonight. He said, 'I'm dying to get my teeth into this job, Sally. It's a bit of a challenge. They talk about cutting it up some day, and perhaps, if I make a good do of it, I might be able to buy a slice, even though I haven't much money. It's splendid, isn't it?'

Sally agreed and said it would be marvellous to have Simon only about ten miles away; she didn't say it would be marvellous to have Elizabeth because in the main she was an honest person. Then Simon said, 'But I oughtn't to be keeping you from all the other blokes. Who's that handsome one over there? He keeps glaring at us and he's looking a bit glum.'

'That's Hugh Davenport, a lawyer. I know him fairly well because his partner did Dad's business and lately Hugh's taken it over. He comes out to the farm sometimes.'



'Are you keen on him?' asked Simon with brotherly frankness.

Sally laughed. 'Goodness me, no. I haven't time to be keen on people. To much to do on the farm. We're just friends.'

'Well, he isn't looking very friendly at this moment. I'd better clear out and talk to someone else. . . . Hullo, what a huge dog. Nice fellow, then. He seems to like you.'

'That's Alister. He's sweet, and Alice is besotted. Oh hullo, Hugh. Have you met Simon Hunter yet?'

Hugh hadn't, and didn't seem to feel it a deprivation. They exchanged a few commonplaces, and Simon drifted off to talk to Alice whom he had known years ago when Sally and he were neighbours. Hugh asked, 'An old friend of yours? He looks a very decent chap,' and the tone was just faintly patronising.

'He's a darling. He's going to manage Luthens, that big place further on from our farm, and he's going to marry Elizabeth Gray. Did you ever meet her? Everybody seems to know her. She's beautiful and very clever. Paints, or plays the harpsichord, or weaves; probably all three. Do you remember her?'

Hugh did, and his eyes turned to Simon with more respect. If he had won that beautiful and accomplished girl, he must have something that had escaped Hugh's notice. Sally said, 'My nose is shiny. I can see it when I wink. I'll go and do my face.'

But this was only part of the reason why she left Hugh standing there; she saw that Alice was alone for a moment and wanted a word with her.

'Do you think we could slip into your room for a second? I want to show you the marvellous bag my godmother sent me from England. I brought it on purpose, but there wasn't a chance to show you because I was rather late. I left it on your dressing-table.'

'Of course. How lovely. An evening bag?'

'No, thank goodness, because I never go out in the evening. Much more useful. A heavenly crocodile one that will go

with everything. I couldn't resist bringing it to show you. It only arrived today and I'm still gloating.'

The room was a confusion of bags and evening wraps but there was no crocodile bag on the dressing-table. The two girls looked at each other in dismay and then Sally said, 'Nonsense. Of course it's here. It's just been moved from the table. Perhaps it's under all these coats.'

But it wasn't; nor was it on the book-case or under the bed. A dreadful fear gripped Alice. She called to Trevor who said at once, 'That damned dog. . . . Now, where will he have taken it?'

Panic spread. Other guests, under the excuse of looking for the missing bag, made sure that their possessions were safe. No, nothing else was missing. With unerring and devilish good taste, Alister had resisted many temptations and had removed the crocodile bag that Sally had so foolishly and enthusiastically brought. There was a surge of people outside, bent on the rather unusual and amusing task of finding a guest's bag that had been purloined by her hostess's dog. Sally found herself with Hugh who said, reasonably but rather irritably, 'Why on earth didn't Mrs Moore keep the door shut, and where are we supposed to look? There's about an acre of garden,' for Dr Moore's house stood a mile out of town, with a superb view and a garden that was already Alice's joy and pride.

Sally was laughing as she peered under a camellia bush, and he thought it was very silly of her. To begin with, it was her bag and an expensive one; she had already told him all about this wonderful present. Apart from that, what was there amusing in the sight of thirty people in good suits and party frocks scattered all over a large, damp garden, trying to see their way with flickering torches or inadequate cigarette lighters? On every hand you could hear stifled giggles or loud and profane exclamations. No one could be really enjoying it, except perhaps Alister who went urbanely from one group to another, very evidently wishing to proffer advice.

It was a dark night, too, and decidedly cold. Everybody

was behaving very well, pretending it was some new and original game and that it didn't matter a bit if your frock caught on a rose bush, or your evening shoes sank suddenly into the deep mould. Sally was protesting, trying to persuade them to give it up and go inside. The extraordinary thing, Hugh thought irritably, was that the girl was still laughing.

'What the hell's amusing you?' he growled. 'And why did you bring the bag tonight? It isn't an evening bag. You'd have shown more sense to leave it at home.'

'But I couldn't bear to part with it, and I wanted Alice to see it. And of course it's funny. Look at all those little flickers of light all over the place. But I do wish they wouldn't bother. What does it matter?'

Thereupon Hugh told her, rather unpleasantly, that she said that far too often; things did matter, and . . . At that moment he stumbled and swore picturesquely. His foot slipped before he could recover himself and Sally exclaimed with horror, only hoping that he would not guess the agony she was going through to contain her amusement.

'What the devil . . .?' began Hugh, and plunged further. Sally tried to seize his arm.

'Oh Hugh, you've gone right into Alice's lily pond. Do be careful. It would be simply dreadful if you trod on any of the dear little gold-fish,' she exclaimed, and was surprised when Hugh said something uncomplimentary about women. At once repenting of her heartless laughter, she held out her hand to Hugh who disregarded it and stepped out, very damp and thoroughly disgruntled.

'Oh, don't make such a fuss,' she cried. 'It's really very shallow and you aren't even wet to the knees. . . . Now, if it had been a swimming-pool . . .'

What further consolation she was about to offer, Hugh was spared, for at that moment his host appeared and, with deep sympathy, took him off to the house to dry out. Just as they reached it, there was a glad cry from Alice. 'Found . . . Found . . . And none the worse.'

Simon, who had drifted to Sally's side in the darkness, shone his torch in the direction of the voice, and there was

Alice, very pretty in her gay frock, waving the crocodile bag above her head. She was triumphant, and beside her trotted Alister, no less pleased and wagging a tail like a scorpion to show there was no ill feeling on his part. He had fancied that bag but was willing to forgo the pleasure of chewing it up.

Everybody poured back into the house and crowded round Alice who said, with quiet pride, 'He'd carried it right into the summer house and laid it on the table, but it's perfectly all right, Sally. He hadn't opened it,' this in a tone that approved Alister's gentlemanly reticence. Then she examined the bag carefully and exclaimed, 'Oh dear, I'm afraid there is one tooth-mark,' pointing to a small but unmistakable dent in the side of the bag.

'That's nothing,' Sally cried stoutly. 'Nothing at all. It makes it all the more genuine, somehow.'

Hugh, who had been comforted with whisky but was still slightly damp, asked coldly, 'Now, what exactly do you mean by that?'

Undaunted, Sally retorted that it just showed that the crocodile had gone down fighting, as anyone with any imagination would realise, and Hugh subsided with a reluctant grin. He was beginning to realise with some regret that it was no use expecting Sally to take anything seriously, or to talk sense.

After that, the party went with a roar. Everyone made a fuss of Alister—'God knows why, except that he didn't exactly ruin the bag,' as Hugh said—and the big dog grew more and more pleased with himself, insisting on sitting in the middle of every doorway in turn, and later on planting himself firmly on the carpet which they were trying to remove for dancing. Sally, who was so popular that she could only spare one dance for Hugh and two for Simon, declared that he was a darling and the success of the evening.

His infatuated owner repeated this to her husband when, at last, the guests had gone, and Sally, refusing reluctantly to stay the night, 'Because Matt would fuss so, and besides we've got to move sheep first thing in the morning,' had driven off



in her little old car. Alice said, 'I do think it went well, don't you, or people wouldn't have stayed so late?'

Her lovely face, a little pale and weary now, touched him, and he said, 'It was a splendid party. The only trouble was that confounded dog. Why does he always have to sit in doorways and trip everybody up? And that was a nasty scare about Sally's bag.'

'Yes, it was dreadfully worrying, for a little, because Sally hasn't many really nice things, but it ended quite all right. In fact, I think it made the party go better. It was such fun everybody peering under the shrubs and bushes and tumbling over each other,' and she tried to wake Alister, who, exhausted by his social efforts, had fallen into a deep slumber on the sofa.

'I hope you'll think it fun when you see your garden in the morning. They were plunging round like a herd of elephants, and Davenport stepped right into the middle of the fish-pond. He took a dim view of it and I don't blame him.'

'I don't consider that Mr Davenport has a good sense of humour,' said Alice with dignity. 'I don't know him well but he seems keen on Sally. Do you like him, Trevor?'

Faced with the necessity of delivering judgement upon another man to a woman, Dr Moore naturally became evasive. 'He seems all right. Very able, so old Lawrence was telling me. Got all the qualities and plenty of ambition.'

Alice looked dubious. 'I can't really see Sally as a lawyer's wife,' she said with commendable moderation. 'I do hope it'll be all right. She's such a happy person.'

Trevor pointed out that there was no reason why a lawyer's wife couldn't be happy, and then said, 'But aren't you being a bit previous? There's no engagement, is there?'

'No, nothing like that. Trevor, isn't it lovely that I should have married you and come to the very part of the country where Sally lives?'

'Lovely that you should have married me, anyway. Yes, I like Sally. She's got lots of pluck. . . . But come along to bed. . . . That brute? Leave him where he is. The door's open.'

It's too late to tie him up now. He should have been in his kennel all evening.'

Alice gave the big dog a tender little pat and said in a sentimental voice, 'It would have spoilt everything to tie him up. He was the success of the party. He and Sally.'

Sally went to town as seldom as possible, so that it was unfortunate that she happened to look in on the Moores a few days after the party at the moment when Trevor was studying his butcher's bill. He was the most generous of men, and did not mean his remark to be taken seriously when he said, 'That damned dog costs as much to feed as we do.'

Immediately Alice looked stricken, an emotion that suited her pale, dark beauty. This was not because Trevor referred to Alister as 'that damned dog', for he seldom spoke otherwise of him, and Alice was perfectly aware that this was the merest camouflage, that he was almost as devoted as she. It was the reference to Alister's meat bill that stirred her conscience.

'Oh dear,' she moaned gently. 'How dreadful. Of course I shouldn't have afforded him.'

Trevor Moore laughed and patted her reassuringly. 'Of course you should. We aren't bankrupt yet. It was just that I thought the amount of dog's meat surprising.'

But Alice still looked worried, for she knew that her husband was not finding this practice he had bought very remunerative as yet. It was, as he had explained to her, a case of 'building it up'. His predecessor had not been interested in building anything up, except perhaps his own consumption of alcohol, and, since this had eventually become phenomenal, the patients had naturally dropped off. When Trevor bought the practice, and before he married Alice, it had been hard to make ends meet; they were doing so now, but not as yet greatly overlapping, and Alice was aware of this. Only last week they had given a party, and parties, she knew, were

expensive. Perhaps she had been selfish, not only over the party, but over Alister.

She talked about it to Sally in the kitchen, and, when Trevor looked in before going on his rounds, she said, 'I've been thinking about that butcher's bill.'

'Don't,' he said briefly. 'Forget it. I was only joking.'

'But it isn't a joke. I feel I ought to try to earn some money.'

'What? Why earn money, for Pete's sake?'

'Because I've saddled you with Alister, and parties and things.'

'And why not? The practice is all right. In fact, it's beginning to boom. We needn't starve Alister or wipe out parties.'

But Alice was looking extremely serious. 'I looked at that butcher's bill and I was appalled. I want to help to pay for Alister.'

He laughed. 'Well, my girl, it wouldn't do the practice much good if you went out washing to pay for the dog. I was a fool to mention it. Now you'll start brooding over the butcher's bill,' for, with Alice's introspective nature she was a little given to what Trevor called 'worrying over a thing like Alister with a bone'.

She replied with dignity, 'I'm not brooding. I'm just thinking things over. And don't be silly about going out washing. I don't mean anything like that, but everybody works today and you know I'm a very clever dressmaker.'

He was in a hurry, and he looked at her with love and exasperation. 'Once and for all, I can support both you and the damned dog, and I won't hear any more about dress-making.'

Alice, who had a one-track mind, had not listened. 'And it would pay marvellously. I could easily earn enough to pay the butcher's bill every week.'

Rashly he retorted, 'Rot. You couldn't earn thirty bob in a day, and, if you could, I don't want you to.'

For once, she was affronted. 'Thirty shillings in a day? Of course I could. Any girl who's just left school can earn that. I could earn it here, in my own house.'



He was getting tired of the argument and thought to close it by saying, 'Well, I'll take a bet on it. Sally, you're the witness. I'll pay Alister's bills for a year, and never make another moan about it, if you can earn thirty bob in one day here, in your own house.'

When he had hurried out, Alice said thoughtfully, 'I'm afraid I was rather rash because I know Trevor wouldn't like me to start dressmaking for my friends, and I can't think of any other way to earn money.'

Recklessly, Sally said, 'I'd love you to make an evening dress for me,' and secretly wondered where she would find the money to buy the material, let alone the thirty shillings which honour would compel her to pay for the making; but she went on stoutly, 'And, if you'd make it for thirty shillings, it'd be a quarter what a dressmaker would charge, and I could come and do your housework while you sewed.'

But Alice shook her head. 'That wouldn't be any good because Trevor would know that we'd fixed it between us. Of course I'd love to make you a frock, and I'd let you do the housework while I sewed, but I couldn't take money for it. . . . Come next week-end, Sally, and let's do it, because people are sure to ask you to parties now, and I'm perfectly certain Alister spoilt your other frock, what with his paw-marks and having to search in the garden for your bag. . . . But I'll just have to forget about that silly bet; only, I do wish . . .' and her face looked wistful, which naturally went straight to Sally's over-tender heart.

All would still have been well, however, if an evil fate had not sent her to her car at the very moment when some strangers drew up outside Dr Moore's gate and she heard one woman say, 'I'm just stopping to look at that marvellous view. . . . And see that pretty terrace and all the little tables and the gay umbrellas? Now, why couldn't someone start a tea-room in a place like that?'

When she heard those words, Sally stood quite still, and then her head went up with a determined little jerk and she muttered. 'I've got it. What an inspiration.' If either Alice or Simon Hunter had heard the words, and seen her expression,

they would have known what it meant and have expected trouble.

She drove on into the town and, at the largest draper's she found they were having a sale. 'That settles it,' said Sally, and immediately spent the £4 she had been saving for the telephone bill on a length of material that would make the evening frock of her dreams, and which the assistant, who knew Sally and liked her, assured her had been 'drastically reduced and was a real good buy'. To save a toll call from the farm, she went into the nearest telephone booth and rang Alice to say that she had bought the material, and would it really be all right if she came on Saturday and stayed the night?

'Marvellous. Come early, Sally. I've got to go out for an hour on Saturday morning to a wretched morning tea, but I'll be home before lunch and Alister will be thrilled to have you, so it won't matter if I'm not here.'

On the contrary, Sally thought, it would be a very good thing. That evening she listened to the weather forecast, saying firmly to herself, 'If it's going to be a fine day, then I'm *meant* to do it'; to Matt she said, 'Will you be all right if I go to the Moores for Saturday and spend the night?' and received the expected answer that on the whole it would be simpler without her.

This did not at all hurt her feelings, for Matt had said that sort of thing to her ever since she could remember. He was a tall, lean old man, very lame from an old war wound, a pessimist by nature and by choice, who had been her father's batman in the war, and had lived with them during the difficult years that followed, through the tragedy of Millicent Leigh's death when Sally was four, through their move to this part of the world, and the increasing problems of a small farm that did not pay.

James Leigh had worked very hard on this farm, but perhaps his spirits had never entirely recovered from the death of his young wife. The move, too, had been disastrous, for he did not know or understand this type of land. More, he had sacrificed a great deal for his only child, paying for an

expensive school and later raising money for the fees for a physiotherapy course. When his sudden death cut short Sally's training, she found that the mortgage he had lovingly and unwisely increased for this purpose was now enough to cripple the whole farm.

She had given up her training at once and returned to help Matt with the two hundred acre farm which carried sheep and run cattle and did neither of them very well. Very reluctantly, six months ago, the pair had decided that they would have to put the property in the market, but they had not been besieged by buyers. The farm was not attractive, and the old rambling house with its big rooms and lack of conveniences made it less so. It was still for sale, the mortgage was still unpaid, and the interest mounting, and Matt grew a little more despondent every day. His devotion to Sally was mingled with disapproval of her incurable gaiety and optimism under conditions which certainly justified neither. He would willingly have died for her, but he scolded her all day long.

However, Sally was used to it and only laughed at Matt's determined pessimism. She said, 'Then I'll be off on Saturday morning and get back on Sunday night, and we can go on mending that fence on Monday. Don't try to do it alone, Matt. I'm not much use, as you're always telling me, but I can help run out a wire and hold battens,' and then she surprised him by disappearing into her bedroom with a large sheet of white cardboard and refusing to tell him what she wanted it for.

On Saturday morning Sally put into the car a few purchases she had made from her grocer, a little ham and some cold tongue, a few tomatoes, and some salad dressing which she had made. When she went out into Matthew's excellent vegetable garden and picked a lettuce, the old man grumbled a little.

'Not doing too well, that doctor friend of yours,' he remarked with pleasure.

'But he is. The practice is growing like mad.'

'Funny thing he can't afford to buy his own vegetables. . . .

And that ham, too. That's tasty, and I was thinking of a bit of it to my tea tonight.'

'But I left you some, and I do wish you wouldn't come snooping to see what I put in the car,' Sally complained as she hurriedly bestowed a flat parcel on the back seat. He limped off, deeply offended, muttering that now she'd made these fine city friends she had no time for an old codger whose days were numbered and who was as lame as a cat and no use to anyone.

Of course Sally ran after him, caught his arm and told him that he ought to be ashamed of himself, that he knew quite well he was her mainstay, that she couldn't possibly live here —'or anywhere', she added in a reckless moment—without him, and that no other friend could take his place.

He was mollified, although he merely commented that soft words never cost much, and it was time she began to think of that interest which was due next week, and what were they going to sell to meet it?

'I don't know and I don't care,' said Sally, climbing into the car. 'It's a lovely day, and I'm going to have fun.'

He stood looking after her, affection in his eyes, but shaking his grey head with foreboding. 'Goin' to have fun. I've heard her say that too often. Not up to any good, she isn't, if she goin' to have fun,' and then, unwillingly, he smiled as he remembered her small hand on his arm, her pretty, eager face.

Alice was out when Sally arrived, but Alister extended a more than gracious welcome, springing up to set his strong paws on her shoulders and almost knocking her backwards onto the concrete path. She said, 'Darling, you're not supposed to jump up, and you've got to be good. I'm going to be busy for a little, and you must sit beside me quietly and not destroy things.'

Then she raided the refrigerator, took out fresh fruit, and prepared to make an exotic salad. When this was done she unwrapped the flat parcel and brought out the sheet of white cardboard that had cost her so much careful effort. On it was printed in big letters, 'Cold lunches. Tea. Coffee.', and

it was large enough completely to conceal the chaste brass plate that announced Dr Trevor Moore's surgery hours.

She wouldn't put it up yet. Alice was adorably vague, but it was more than possible that the notice would catch her eye as she returned from her morning tea party. Sally must wait. It would be unfortunate if Alice were so late that no one would want tea or coffee or even a delightful cold lunch on the terrace.

To her surprise, Alice appeared at 10.30. This was a trifle embarrassing as the kitchen table was strewn with the food that Sally had prepared; on the other hand, it meant that the notice could go up at once.

Alice said, 'No morning tea party. The hostess is down with influenza, so we'll have a quiet day sewing while Trevor's at his country clinic. . . . But, Sally, what on earth's all that food for? If you think you can't come out for the week-end without bringing ham and lettuce and what's it, you must have taken Trevor's remark about the butcher's bill far too seriously. . . . All right. I'm not offended, and fresh vegetables are a treat, but don't do it again.'

With no hesitation at all Sally assured her hostess that she would not do it again, and waited till Alice had gone into her bedroom before she slipped out to the gate with the sheet of cardboard under her arm. With adhesive tape she fastened it carefully over the brass plate, then looked up wistfully at the red lamp. 'I wish I could hide that too,' she told the attendant Alister, but consoled herself with the thought that few people looked above their heads, and that, if they did, they would think it an old lamp that had not been removed, because who would connect a doctor's house with lunches and teas?

At this moment she did have a brief qualm as she wondered whether any local people would see the notice; but it was Saturday, the Moores' house was well out of town, and the chances of a patient or another medical man passing were small. In any case Sally's conscience seldom worked over-time, and she went back to the house preening herself on the originality of her inspiration.



In spite of the excitement of the new frock, which Alice tackled quietly and efficiently, the morning passed slowly. Sally kept listening; surely a car would pull up at the gate soon? She went on cleaning windows rapidly and kept an eye on the quiet suburban street that led up the hill to this house with the perfect view and the enchanting terrace.

Would her plan turn out a complete failure after all? If so, no one need know anything about it. That in itself was a comforting thought, for Sally, who always realised too late the consequences of her actions, was beginning to feel a little nervous when she wondered in cold blood just what Dr Trevor Moore might have to say about it. Best not to think about it at all. Probably nothing would come of it.

It was after twelve when she saw two cars stop at the gate. Evidently a family party, and they were reading the notice with interest. Seven grown-up people, no children. If they were coming in, and Sally charged them five shillings each for their lunch, there would be the money made and the bet won. Sally began to feel quite dithery with excitement and the need of concealing her emotions from Alice.

Her friend glanced up from the seam she was carefully tacking and looked out of the window. 'Oh, bother those people. They're coming in and I don't want to stop now that I've got well into the job. Who are they, and what do they want? Surely not an accident? None of them seems to be hurt?'

Sally said with immense self-control, 'Perhaps I had better go out and see.' To her dismay, Alice sighed and said, 'I'll have to go, I suppose. I do wish I had a better memory for faces. A doctor's wife ought to have.' Then she said with some surprise, 'They seem to be making themselves at home, but I'm sure I've never seen any of them before. Sally, do look. They're actually sitting down at the tables on the terrace.'

A fatal desire to laugh seized Sally, but she only said, 'I'll go out and see.'

Unfortunately, Alice's sense of duty compelled her to say, 'No, it's my job. Do you think they could be slightly mental, Sally?' and she went off with an apprehensive expression, to

return saying dazedly, 'Either they're mad or I am. Could I have asked them to lunch and have forgotten? But I'm sure I didn't. I think they must be mental patients from the hospital.'

Sally said briskly, 'They do seem a little queer. Seven of them, too. Well, the only thing to do is to humour them. Perhaps it's one of those mass escapes from the Mental Hospital. We'd better feed them to keep them quiet. Lucky I cut up all that salad.' Alice peered nervously out at the people on the terrace. They were admiring the view and talking in quiet, pleasant voices. She said, 'They seem absolutely harmless. Really quite nice. But I've heard mental cases are like that as long as they're not crossed. Oh Sally, isn't it awkward when we're alone like this? Do you think I ought to ring the police?'

'Oh no, not on any account. We don't want a row and it getting into the papers. So bad for Trevor's practice. Let's just give them lunch and pretend it's all quite normal.'

And this is what she persuaded Alice to do. Once her friend was occupied, Sally ran quickly down to the gate and removed the offending notice, carrying it back to the house, much to Alister's frustration, under her apron. Then the two girls served a pleasant if not original luncheon, made some very good coffee, and found their visitors ('Only they're really customers', Sally told herself) very amiable people.

Alice, who had approached them at first with some nervousness and set the dishes down in a gingerly way on the tables, presently said to Sally, 'There's really nothing to be frightened of. The poor things are enjoying their day out. I do hope the warders, or whatever they call them, don't catch up with them here. It's rather nice to see them so happy. Queer, but they seem just as normal as you or me,' and fortunately did not hear Sally say, in answer to her customers' enquiry, 'Yes, five shillings each, thank you. Oh no, the coffee and fruit aren't extras, and I'm so glad you've enjoyed your lunch.'

Diffidently, the older man of the party laid the money on the table and said, 'I'd like to say thank you to the other lady,

too. This has been a charming experience, quite unique in our tour of New Zealand. A perfect view and such a home-like atmosphere. I wish we weren't just tourists passing through and could come again.'

'Thank goodness they can't,' thought Sally, and was a little embarrassed by Alice's appearance at the door. She was gazing with a sort of fascination at the party, and her expression said clearly, 'Seven mental patients, and all so nice.' Then she saw the money on the table and began to protest, but with much delicacy the visitors ignored her confused murmur and departed hurriedly, the man reiterating as he left, 'Couldn't wish for a more delightful place. Wish we knew people to recommend it to. Hope you do well,' and went off beaming.

Alice gazed in a sort of stunned amazement at the thirty-five shillings lying on the table. 'They were dreadfully mad,' she said slowly. 'Paying me for lunch. Whatever possessed them?'

Sally, who had collapsed into a chair, managed to pull herself together enough to say, 'Why not? They had a very good lunch, and, even if they were a little insane in some ways, they were quite normal most of the time. Take the money, Alice. You've earned it,' for she saw a dreadful inclination on her friend's part to rush out and return the cash.

'Of course I can't keep it I couldn't possibly be paid for giving anyone lunch, especially poor mad people who were having their one happy day,' but at that moment, to Sally's immense relief, the cars pulled away from the gate.

Alice stood looking at the money, her face very pink. 'How awful. . . . Just as if we were a restaurant. I feel so ashamed.'

'That's silly. I'd never be ashamed of earning honest money,' and at the words a strange light came into her friend's eyes.

'*Earning*,' she repeated in a dazed voice. '*Earning*. Sally, I've earned thirty-five shillings—at least we have, because you did more than half. . . . Do you remember how Trevor said I couldn't earn thirty shillings in my own house in one day?'

Sally admitted that she had a faint recollection of the bet.

'And now I can tell Trevor that I've won it. I did truly earn it.' Then a sadness clouded her triumph. 'The only thing that spoils it is that I feel I've exploited those poor people.'

A belated honesty compelled Sally to reassure her. 'I don't believe they were insane. I think they made a genuine mistake. The terrace looks so gay with all those little tables and umbrellas. Why, just the other day I heard someone say how lovely it looked and what a pity someone didn't start a tea-room here.'

But Alice was not to be comforted. 'Oh, of course they were insane in a nice gentle way. They couldn't have made a mistake. How could anyone think a house with a doctor's plate was a tea-room?'

With a gulp, Sally said, 'But the plate was covered with this,' and produced the sheet of cardboard.

Later, much later, when they had recovered and were able to talk coherently, Alice said, 'Thank Heaven they were tourists. How awful if they'd been people from town, patients perhaps, who'd think Trevor had started a side-line. Oh, they were awfully nice, but I'm glad I'll never see them again. . . . For goodness' sake, Sally, put that awful notice in the incinerator and I'll burn it presently with the rubbish. . . . How could you make out those people were lunatics?'

'Actually, you started the idea yourself. Not that I wasn't jolly glad of it, but it was you who first said they must be mad.'

But there was still Trevor to face. When he came back from his country clinic Alice muttered to Sally, 'Now for it,' and picked up the money from the kitchen table. 'Darling, have you forgotten the bet you made with me about earning money? Well, I've done it. Here's thirty-five shillings I earned this morning without even moving from the house.'

The doctor laughed indulgently. 'You've been sewing. Making a dress for Sally, I'll bet. You two've cooked this up between you. No moral conscience at all.'

'I didn't earn it like that,' Alice said, blushing violently. Then she paused, searching for words. But at that moment

Trevor's attention was distracted by Alister, who had come in and laid at his master's feet a large sheet of cardboard on which were still clearly discernible the words, 'Cold lunches. Tea. Coffee.'

Trevor said, 'Hullo, what next? Dear, this damned dog of yours has been visiting a tea-room and stolen their sign. . . . Why, what's up?'

The girls were staring with horror at the notice. Too late, Alice remembered the rubbish she had meant to burn. With devilish selectiveness Alister had chosen this from the paper bags, the dead flowers, the empty cartons in the incinerator, and had brought it to his master. Now he was wagging his tail, looking from one of his beloved people to the other, obviously waiting for applause.

Sally swallowed and said, 'Trevor, I've a confession to make. Rather a dreadful one. Promise not to forbid me the house.'

He smiled very kindly. 'That's an easy promise to make. Fire ahead.'

'I know you'll understand because your sense of humour's so good.'

'What's known as the softening up process. Cut it out.'

Sally did, and plunged. When she had finished there was a pause and then Trevor said, 'A sign at the gate. . . . Money for lunches. . . . My God!' and presently, after another silence, during which the two girls looked stricken, 'Holy mackerel, what next?'

The last exclamation sounded more promising and Sally rushed in hurriedly, 'But really, Trevor, the notice was only up a little time and the people were just tourists passing through. I don't suppose anyone you know would have seen it, and . . .'

At this moment, to his eternal credit, Trevor Moore began to laugh. 'Sally, you're a corrupting influence.'

Later, the corrupting influence said hopefully, 'Really, Trevor, there's no fear at all that anyone would think Alice had started a tea-room, though she could make an awful lot of money if she did,' and Sally, who was at the moment quite



desperate for even a little money when she allowed herself to think of it, which was seldom, sighed wistfully.

On Monday morning when several of the visiting doctors were gathered in the hospital common room for a cup of tea, one of them said, 'These damned larrikins are getting pretty bad in this town. Nothing they won't do. Tell you what I saw at your gate the other day, Moore—actually one of these hooligans had fastened a notice over your plate, advertising teas and lunches. Bloody cheek. Who'd have the hide to do that sort of thing to a medical man?'

Trevor Moore looked duly shocked. 'It wasn't there when I got home. Whoever did it must have lost their nerve and taken it down.'

One of the residents laughed. 'It would have been a bit of a joke if someone had taken it seriously and gone in and demanded lunch on that terrace of yours.'

Another doctor commented, 'A shock for your wife. She'd have thought the mental patients had come to town.'

'Oh, I expect she'd have coped,' Trevor said easily. 'But I'd like to give the idiot who put up that notice a piece of my mind.'

This was precisely what Hugh Davenport was doing at the moment. He had called in at the farm on his way back from an important and bedridden client, and Sally had made the mistake of telling him, under pledge of secrecy, the whole story. He listened in silence and then said crushingly, 'Have you no sense of responsibility at all?'

'None,' said Sally cheerily. 'How solemn you look. Is that the sort of expression you wear when you're defending a murderer?'

'Only when I'm trying to argue about my client's sanity,' Hugh said gently, and Sally had to admit that he had scored.

About a fortnight after the party, Matt said, 'You'd better get into town and see that bank manager. He's turning nasty and there's bills to pay.'

Sally sighed. 'There always are. What about you going, Matt? You could talk to the bank manager much better than I can.'

Matt gave a grim chuckle. 'Talk? There's no one can beat you for that. If he don't give us a bigger overdraft by the time you've finished with him, I'll eat my hat. Get along with you and take a morning off. You've been working too hard at that blasted fence,' and he turned away to hide the affection in his eyes.

The thought of a morning off sent Sally's spirits soaring, in spite of the interview at the bank that loomed ahead. Here, however, as Matthew had prophesied, all went well and she parted with the manager on the best of terms and with a rash promise to pay off the overdraft as soon as the farm was sold. ('If ever,' she murmured to herself as she went along the street.)

And then she saw Simon and forgot all about bills and overdrafts, for she had not seen him since the night of Alice's party. She waved ecstatically and was a little dashed for a moment to see that his response lacked enthusiasm. Even at a distance he looked depressed, and he was evidently on his way to the post office, for he carried a letter in his hand. He pulled up at sight of her but she did not feel that he was really pleased. However, Sally had no intention of being daunted by that; something had happened to Simon; she must find out at once what it was and help him.

She said, 'What's up? You look down in your luck.'

He grinned, but forlornly. 'Everything's up. I'm just posting this letter. It's to the manager of the firm that's running Luthens. I've told them I can't take the job.'

Remembering his excitement and elation, Sally was taken aback. 'But why not take it? You haven't changed your mind, have you?'

'No, but they will. They want a married man. I'm not going to be married.'

There was a fierce pain in his voice and she said quickly, 'Oh Simon, I'm so sorry. Do come and tell me about it. It's been a hard day and I'm dead on my feet.' (Which was not true, because Sally was extremely strong, and, although distracted by trying to decide which bills to pay, was not at all tired.) 'Do ask me to have tea with you. There's a funny little place near here where we can talk.'

For a moment he was not enthusiastic. Evidently he had not yet reached the stage when talking would be a relief. He said, 'All right, if you want to, but I don't know what good it can do. Everything's blown up.'

She took no notice of that, remembering that, long ago, when she was about fourteen, he had sought her out to confide in her his disappointment at missing one of his examinations. Nor did she remind him that, two years later, when they were beginning to drift apart because he had gone to an Agricultural College to do research, he had surprised her by confiding in her that he was very much in love with a girl who, in his own words, 'Wouldn't be seen dead marrying him.' By that time, she had recovered from her brief infatuation for Simon and was able to sympathise whole-heartedly with his disappointment. Even then, she was experienced in other people's troubles, for, being a natural listener and a warmly sympathetic person, she received a great many confidences. Today she was determined to know all about Simon's trouble and said briskly: 'It's always a good idea to talk about things. Sorts them out. Here's the tea-room, and it'll be pretty quiet at this hour.'

They sat down at a table at the far end of the room and

Sally ordered tea and a sandwich for each of them with a very masterful air. When the waitress had left them in peace she said, 'Come along, Simon. Spit it out.'

The vulgar expression made him smile, for he remembered using it to her when she was a very small girl and he an impatient adolescent. He had found her weeping bitterly because she could not learn the three times table and had spared fifteen minutes of his valuable fifteen-year-old time teaching it to her. She had adopted the expression, to the amusement of her father and Matt, and for a time it had been a sort of catch-word between herself and Simon.

He began, a little reluctantly and very miserably, 'Well, Elizabeth says it's off.'

'Off? What, the job?'

'Yes—and me. She doesn't want to marry a farmer. She wants to marry a lecturer in an Agricultural College.'

'Any lecturer, or you?'

'Me, at least she did, but I rather think she's got someone lined up now more to her taste. Anyway, she turned the station down flat. Wouldn't even come to look at it. Said nothing would induce her to bury herself in the backblocks, away from civilisation and culture. I suppose she had something there,' he ended miserably, 'because of course she's awfully brilliant and social.'

'She's a bitch,' said Sally with finality, 'and you needn't start to lecture me and point out all her virtues. I never did like Elizabeth Gray. Too madly superior and full of herself. . . . But how frightfully mean of her.'

'It was a bit of a knock. She made absolute conditions for going on with our engagement. No farm job. No manager-ship. The city, and either an instructor's job or a lectureship. Take it or leave it.'

'And I hope you left it—and her.'

'Not before we'd had a hell of a row. All on paper, too, which made it worse. Her letter—well it was rather a stinker, and naturally when I answered I said I didn't want her to take me on her terms and not on mine.'

'And then?'

'Then she wired, "Matter definitely concluded. Please do not communicate again." '

He looked, Sally thought, like an unhappy and disappointed little boy as he brought out a crumpled telegram form and handed it to her for confirmation.

Sally read it and said, 'Damn the girl. This is the best thing to do with that,' and, very deliberately, she applied the match with which she was about to light a cigarette to the corner of the telegram and watched it burn to ashes in the large tray the thoughtful management had provided.

There was a silence, and then she said, 'Does that really mean that you can't take the job? Wouldn't Aunt Dorothy do? After all, she'd be far nicer than Elizabeth. All the people on the station would adore her and bring her all their troubles and she'd be awfully sweet and wise in her funny vague way. Elizabeth wouldn't be a bit of a success at that. Don't give up the job, Simon. You were so keen on it.'

'I still am, but Aunt Dorothy couldn't stay for ever, and they said from the start that it had to be a married man.'

'Oh, but you might easily be married by the time Aunt Dorothy had to leave. I'm sure they must want you to have that job. They won't turn you down just because of Elizabeth. Don't post that letter, Simon.'

'You're a kind kid, Sally. You always were. But I know it's no use. They've got some other very good men after the job; they'll simply appoint the one that came next to me. I met him; a very experienced chap with a nice wife and a couple of kids. They'll be glad of the children because it'll boost the little local school.'

'But I think it's ridiculous to appoint a manager because his children will boost the wretched little school. Oh Simon, it's awfully mean of Elizabeth. I wish you'd take the job. It'd wipe her eye.'

'The firm would only wipe mine if I didn't tell them the truth. It's no go, Sally. I'll just have to go back to the theoretical work.'

'You mustn't. You can still get a manager's job. Everybody doesn't want a married man.'



'They do in the sort of job I want. Big stations all seem to have married managers.'

Sally looked very downcast. It was horrible of Elizabeth, and Simon seemed so miserable. She couldn't bear any of her friends to be miserable, Simon less than most of them because it was such a very old friendship and he was such a dear. She sat smoking in silence with wild plans going through her head of appealing to Elizabeth, or, better still, of finding some fascinating girl who would be perfectly delighted to live on a backblocks station and who would be so attractive that Simon would fall for her immediately and marry her out of hand.

So absorbed was she in the problem that she hardly noticed a tall, important-looking man enter the tea-room, and, after pausing and looking round, come across to their table and hold out his hand to Simon, who rose, looking extremely embarrassed. This surprised Sally, for Simon was an easy and sociable person; but the stranger's first words explained it.

'Good afternoon, Mr Hunter. Well met. I've been wanting to discuss one or two Luthens problems with you, but I didn't quite know where to get hold of you. Now we can make an appointment at my office. . . . But excuse me; you haven't introduced me to your charming companion.'

It was rather laboured and pompous and Sally felt her lips quiver at the words 'Charming companion'; did people really talk like that nowadays?

Simon still looked embarrassed and made the introduction clumsily. At once Mr Ford, for that appeared to be his name, beamed upon her. 'And this is the young lady who is to go to Luthens and share your life there? Is it in order to wish you every happiness?'

At these words Simon's face turned a deep crimson and he opened his mouth to enlighten Mr Ford. Before he could do so some madness seized Sally. Looking back later she wondered quite what evil spirit had possessed her; instead of disillusioning Mr Ford, she smiled very sweetly upon him and said, 'Thank you so much, Mr Ford. I'm sure I'll love it at Luthens.'

If Simon had been crimson before, his colour now deepened alarmingly. He began, 'As a matter of fact . . .' and Sally saw that he was preparing to produce the letter which he had returned to his pocket. She took a deep breath; it was now or never.

She said very brightly, 'But of course it won't be just yet, Mr Ford. You see, I've got to sell my own farm first. But you'll love Mrs Forster, Simon's aunt. She'll hold the fort perfectly.'

Her pretty face with its fine hazel eyes, and her friendly manner won Mr Ford's heart. He thought Simon a very lucky man and said so. He was a little surprised, but very pleased, to see what a shy pair they were. So unusual in these days. Actually, the girl was blushing prettily, and looking far more self-conscious than most young women of her age. He liked a certain maidenly bashfulness. It gave a softness to a girl which many of them woefully lacked nowadays. For the matter of that, Simon seemed uncommonly shy too; he was blushing even more furiously and far less becomingly than his prospective bride. Mr Ford thought they were a very charming and unsophisticated pair.

To put them at their ease, he went on talking about Luthens, about the manager's house which Sally was shortly to adorn, as he put it; about the people on the station, the problems that continually arose. Sally, carefully avoiding Simon's eye, listened with an apparently burning interest. Yes, thought Mr Ford, there was no doubt at all that this girl, in spite of her youth, would make the right kind of wife for the manager of Luthens. It was good, too, that she apparently owned a farm; they didn't want a city girl at Luthens who might be bored and discontented.

Presently, Simon, who had remained painfully tongue-tied and obviously struggling with some strong emotion, made a move to go. But his fiancée seemed positively unwilling to seek the privacy which every engaged couple usually coveted. She made an excuse to remain: 'Mr Ford is so frightfully interesting.' The important and pompous executive positively beamed. This was a very discerning girl.

But it had to come to an end at last, and Sally rose with a pretty expression of regret. She was horrified to see Simon hesitate and his hand stray to his pocket. Was he going to present that letter after all her desperate efforts? Their eyes met and hers entreated him. He hesitated a moment and then his hand emerged, innocently carrying the change to pay for their tea. Taking no risks of a further catastrophe, Sally accepted Mr. Ford's enthusiastic congratulations and hope for a future meeting, and led Simon firmly out.

She was beginning to feel nervous. She had been utterly mad to do it. As usual, she had acted on impulse, a rather more foolish impulse than most of hers. All she had cared about was the unhappiness in Simon's face and the urgent need to stop his delivering that letter.

His face was not unhappy now. Peering up sideways at him, Sally was not sure whether the emotion was more bewilderment or anger. She said quickly, 'Well, that's that. Don't look so nervous. I'm not going to marry you against your will, you know. I was only playing for time.'

'Playing' . . . The word was explosive and augured no good, 'Do you ever do anything else but play? Can't you ever be serious? That was a damned poor joke.'

They had reached the hotel where Simon was staying. She said in a small voice, 'Don't shout at me in the street, Simon. Let me come up to your room.'

He hesitated, glowered unpleasantly at her, and gave way, implying by his manner that his acquiescence was not to be taken as a sign of weakness.

When at last she faced him in privacy, to her utter shame she began to laugh. It was the worst thing she could have done. Simon's expression said clearly that now she had made a fool of him, an utter fool, and she was getting a lot of fun out of it. He turned from her in cold dislike and stood looking out of the window.

When she could trust her voice, Sally said, 'I only said it to stop you throwing up the job. Don't be so cross, Simon. It doesn't mean a thing.'

'Doesn't mean a thing? You announce our engagement from the roof-tops, and . . . and . . .'

'I do wish you wouldn't exaggerate. There weren't any roof-tops, and it was only that nice old man. He's sweet, isn't he?'

'I didn't notice it. He won't be particularly sweet when he finds out that you've made a fool of him. Why the hell did you do it, Sally?'

Sally had been wondering for some time. She said slowly, 'Well, I didn't want you to give him that letter or to say you wouldn't take the job. It was—what's the word my teacher always used for anything I did? It was precipitate. Really, it was awfully rash and just because you were hurt. Do take time to think it over.'

'My God, you to talk about being rash! Anyway, what's the good? Elizabeth has made up her mind. All the time in the world wouldn't make any difference to her. She wouldn't answer my letter. You saw her beastly telegram yourself.'

'Oh, Elizabeth!' The scorn in her voice dismissed Elizabeth for ever. Then she went on, 'But there are lots of other girls. Nice ones. Not me, of course, because you and I've known each other too long and we don't feel like that, do we?'

'Not at all.' His voice was uncompromising, and Sally laughed.

'Dear old Simon, you haven't changed. I don't think you ever said a pretty thing to me in your life and I wouldn't know what to do if you did.'

He felt a little contrite. 'Sorry, Sally, but you've put me in a devil of a fix. Don't you realise what you've done? You've told Ford we're engaged, and the old fool has fallen for you.'

She laughed again. Simon was returning to form. She didn't mind in the slightest what he said about her, if only his face lost that miserable, lost look it had worn when she first met him. She said, 'Well, he'll get over that when he finds I've jilted you.'

'You've what?'

'Well, of course one of us must jilt the other. You can chuck me if you'd rather, but Mr Ford mightn't think it very

gentlemanly of you. Far better to let me be the faithless one.'

Simon sat down suddenly. 'This is beyond me. What do you think you're going to do now?'

Sally said practically, 'Smoke a cigarette if you'll give me one. Then you'll cool down and we can make plans.'

When he had complied she said cheerfully, 'Now, Simon, it's no use going on blasting me. I don't mind admitting that perhaps I spoke rather impulsively.'

'Kind of you. I'd put it more strongly.'

'Well, perhaps a little foolishly, but I only meant to help you and it seemed the simplest way.'

'You haven't changed. Even when you were a kid you were always wanting to help people and talking about things being perfectly simple—and they always ended up damned complicated. Can't you see that this time you've got yourself into a frightful fix?'

'What does that matter?' asked Sally, and Simon glared at her.

'You haven't changed in that either. It was always your theme song, and then you used to get into all sorts of trouble.'

'And you helped me to get out of it,' Sally said beguilingly, but reflecting that in this one respect he was like Hugh Davenport. It seemed to make both of them cross when she said, 'What does it matter?' The truth was that they both thought things mattered that didn't. It was really the only point they had in common.

She smiled at the thought, and, when he asked her exasperatedly what was up now, she said, 'It's just that it really is rather a fix this time. But don't worry, Simon, I'll get you out of it.'

'Thanks very much. As you're the cause of it all, it's certainly your job. May I ask how you're going to do it? Everyone will hear we're engaged and want to know when we're going to be married. All those people Alice Moore had there the other night. That bloke Davenport, who kept glowering at me. . . . By the way, what are you going to tell him?'

Sally paused. To tell the truth, this side had not occurred



to her. However, she refused to be daunted and said, 'Hugh? What does that matter?' and then tried to bite back an expression that seemed to have an unfortunate effect on people's tempers. 'I mean, I can easily explain to Hugh. He's a lawyer and they're used to keeping a frightful lot of secrets.'

'And the others? You seemed to make a number of friends the other night. Are they all going to keep it quiet?'

Sally looked worried for the first time. 'Do stop nagging and let me think. There must be some quite easy way out.'

'It'll take all your genius to find it,' he retorted sarcastically, and she gave him a reproachful glance. 'After all, I was only trying to help,' she said, and again he felt some compunction. Sally had always tried to help; very often in the wrong way, but her intentions had always been excellent.

'I know,' she said suddenly. 'The thing to do is to tell Mr Ford we don't want it announced just yet, not till I've got clear of the farm. We'll ask him not to mention my name. Just to wait a little.'

'And then?'

'Then you can throw me over.'

'And be in exactly the same position as I am today.'

She had to admit that so far her plot had not greatly advanced Simon's cause. She said, 'Do let me think. . . . No, of course you won't still be stranded. I promise solemnly, Simon, to find the right wife for you before the three months are up.'

He glared at her. 'I don't want a wife found for me. I'll find my own.'

Not unreasonably, she said, 'Well, you haven't been very clever at it so far,' and then, with quick compunction, she put her hand on his arm and said, 'Oh Simon, that was horrid of me. It's just that I feel Elizabeth never was the sort of girl who'd make the right wife for a station manager. She's beautiful and clever, but that's not the only thing you want on a backblocks place, is it?' She stopped, confused and a little out of breath.

'And you propose to find someone who'll fill the bill?'

How horrid he was being. She flushed unhappily, secretly

appalled now by what she had done. Then, because it was impossible for Sally to be defeated for long, she said hardily, 'But of course there are lots of other girls; nice girls who would love to marry you, Simon. Why not? You're awfully attractive to some girls. Not, of course, if they've known you all their lives, but . . .'

'Thank you,' he said stonily, and she gave an irrepressible giggle.

'What I mean is that you needn't be afraid of my . . . what's the expression? Yes, of my taking advantage of you. I haven't the slightest wish to. I've known you too long. But girls fall like mad for the lean, sunburnt type. They even like,' finished Sally tartly, 'to be blasted and sworn at.'

'For God's sake shut up and talk sense.'

She laughed. 'You see what I mean? Frightfully appealing—but not to me.' But she felt more cheerful. It was easier to cope with a violent, blasphemous Simon than with a grim sarcastic one. She said briskly, 'I've got it all planned. The first thing to do is to ring up that nice Mr Ford and impress on him that what we told him was our precious little secret. We just breathed it in his ear, but we're not announcing it yet.'

'Why not?' asked Simon, blankly and disagreeably.

'Because . . . Oh, let me think . . . Because I've got a rich aunt who'd be dreadfully opposed to my marrying a station manager.'

'Why? And you haven't got an aunt. You've never had an aunt.'

'What does that matter? I do wish you wouldn't be so literal. Anyone can have an aunt if they want to, and I only wish I had a nice rich one at this moment. She might lend a hand with some of those beastly bills. . . . Yes, that's it. I've got a rich aunt and I must keep in with her till the farm's sold.'

'Why?'

The repeated monosyllable was getting on Sally's nerves. She said crossly, 'You're just like a parrot that only knows one word and keeps saying it. . . . Do give me time to think. Or, better still, have a go at thinking yourself. After all, I'm

only doing it for your sake. It's maddening of you to keep barking "Why?" when I'm trying to do my best. . . . Well, let's use our imagination. . . . I know. If she's not pleased with me, the aunt can stop the sale of the farm because I owe her money. Once it's sold, I'm my own mistress. But, if she finds out about you, she might block everything,' and Sally beamed happily at her own cleverness.

'That's frightfully thin.'

'So's Aunt Amy,' said Sally, now quite above herself. 'One of those skinny, acid types who hold mortgages and grind the faces of their nieces. Mr Ford will be terribly sorry for me about it.'

'If he swallows that, he'll swallow anything.'

'Bet you five bob he does.'

'I won't bet. I've bet with you before and you're thoroughly dishonest.'

'And you're no help. Just sit there criticising when I'm trying to do my best for you. . . . No, don't start that again. . . . You've said it all before. . . . Well, the sooner I speak to Mr Ford the better, before he spreads the glad tidings. I'll ring him up now and put our precious little secret into his safe keeping.'

'For Pete's sake wait. Think it over. You can't put that story across.'

'I can and I will. I never believe in thinking things over. It doesn't do any good,' and Sally picked up the bedside telephone.

Unfortunately, she found Samuel Ford in his office. With burning ears Simon listened to Sally's side of the conversation. It was garrulous and very confused. Aunt Amy and a mortgage and borrowed money and the need for secrecy figured largely in the story, but the general effect was obviously disarming if involved. The trouble was, thought Simon, that Sally's voice was so soft and beguiling; he could almost see the poor old devil at the other end being wooed by it.

'You see, Mr Ford, we knew we could trust you with our secret, because you're so sympathetic and understanding. . . . Yes, as soon as the farm is sold it'll be quite all right, but

Aunt Amy is so unreasonable. . . . How old? About seventy, I think, and she's never married, so she doesn't understand about—about love.'

As she cooed these words Sally turned and winked outrageously at Simon, and suddenly, for the first time, he gave a reluctant grin. She was certainly a hussy, but in some incredible way she seemed capable of pulling things off. She was still talking in that charming, confiding voice: 'Yes, I knew you'd be like that. I felt it as soon as I saw you. . . . Oh yes, it'll be heavenly to live at Luthens. Dull? What an idea! Of course I'm a farmer too. . . . No, I can never understand girls who always want to go to dances and parties. The social life doesn't attract me at all.' This in a voice that Simon later told her was unspeakably smug.

At last she replaced the receiver and turned to him with a slightly flushed face.

'That's all right. I told you he was a pet. He won't tell a soul our lovely little secret, and he says he'll try and find a buyer for the farm.'

'And when he does?'

'Oh, don't look ahead and do stop worrying. After all, I've put myself out a great deal for you. No one likes inventing aunts and telling lies. I only did it because I'm fond of you.'

He laughed at last, laughed like the old Simon who had always scolded her for her escapades and then laughed and forgiven her in the end. He said, 'You haven't changed, Sally. You were always a little idiot, rushing in to help people and never giving a thought to the consequences. Well, my dear, I'm afraid your kindness of heart has rather landed you in the soup this time.'

Nothing would have made her admit it, but in her heart Sally was inclined to think that it had. But at least Simon had cheered up and was behaving better. He had given up harping on the fact that she had landed him in the soup too.

'I'm not nagging,' said Hugh Davenport patiently. 'All I'm asking is why you did it.'

'It's the same thing, as nagging, because I've told you already I didn't want Simon to send that letter. He was so keen on the job and he was dreadfully disappointed.'

'Since being engaged to you appears to be a necessary qualification for the job, is he keen on that too?'

'I do wish you wouldn't talk like that. All those silly long words like qualification. . . . The whole thing's perfectly simple. Haven't you ever done anything on the spur of the moment in your whole life?'

Looking at his handsome, self-controlled face, Sally thought, 'I'll bet he hasn't. I'll never get him to understand.'

'Nothing as foolish as this. Nothing that would have awkward consequences. Can't you see that you've put yourself in a most equivocal position?'

'Equivocal. . . . There you go again. . . . I call it showing off, just to prove you know a lot of long words.'

Hopeless to keep her to the point; better to adopt shock tactics. He said brusquely, 'Well, when are you going to marry Simon Hunter?'

'Marry Simon? Are you quite mad? Of course I'm not going to marry him at all. Whatever gave you that idea?'

'It is customary,' said Hugh, resuming the judicial manner and keeping his temper with difficulty, 'for marriage to follow an engagement.'

'But we're not engaged. At least, not really. Just enough engaged for Simon to get settled into Luthens and for them to see how good he is. Then he can jilt me.'



Davenport's expression said clearly that it would be the wisest thing he could do. 'And meantime? Do you accept the congratulations of your friends?'

'Of course not. They'll know nothing about it. Mr Ford knows it's a secret. I'm telling you and the Moores, no one else. You're a lawyer and Trevor's a doctor. You ought to be used to keeping secrets.'

'And Mrs Moore?'

'Oh, Alice never talks. I've told her everything since I was ten and she's perfectly safe. But I'm going to tell her because otherwise she might think it queer.'

'She'll probably think it queer when you do tell her.'

'Oh no. Alice will understand. But I'll tell her because of course she wouldn't expect me to be engaged to Simon in two minutes after not seeing him for years, and besides . . .'

For once, Sally hesitated. Rather awkward to say, 'Besides, there's you,' especially as, at the moment, Hugh didn't look as if he wanted to be the 'you' in the case. She said hurriedly, 'So there's really nothing at all to fuss about, and dear old Simon will get the job he wants so much.'

'Until he—er—he jilts you?'

'Oh, by that time they'll have found out how splendid he is, and I'll have found the right sort of girl for him to marry.'

'You propose to provide a substitute before you say good-bye?'

'Of course. I know lots of nice girls and Simon's awfully attractive. I'm starting looking for one tomorrow.'

He tried to restrain her enthusiasm, but something in the sight of her small, eager face with its shining eyes stopped him. Instead, he laughed reluctantly and then regretted it and said severely, 'Sally, for God's sake stop minding other people's business. You're always at it. It's only a week since you worked that silly affair of the tea-room, and now you're in a jam because you pretended to be engaged to Simon Hunter. What next?'

'Nothing. I'm going to be fearfully careful from now on. Besides, it's not quite fair to put it all onto me. It was Mr Ford who made the mistake. All I did was to say nothing.'

'For the first time in your life, I should think.'

'Which only goes to prove that it's much better not to be an oyster. . . . Now, Hugh, do talk about something else. It's such a dull subject, and I do solemnly promise to be most—now, what's the word you would use?—most circumspect in future. How's that?'

Impossible to resist that gay, laughing face. Of course she was utterly irresponsible, entirely unpredictable, and a confounded nuisance in a man's orderly life. Not, in short, at all the sort of girl to marry, but still. . . . He smiled at her and said, 'Very well. If you keep that promise I won't say any more.'

'Solemn word of honour. Cut my throat if I lie. Will that do?'

'For the present, but without prejudice. Now, what about dinner with me and that film tonight?'

'Lovely. You're rather a poppet after all,' and she reached up on tip-toe and bestowed a little kiss on his left ear. 'That's without prejudice,' she laughed.

He didn't really like being called a poppet. He thought the expression childish and silly. But he enjoyed being kissed by Sally, even if it was 'without prejudice', and if, as he knew, Sally thought nothing of a casual kiss. He had seen her bestow them on various people and on many animals. Particularly on that great brute of a dog of the Moores.

Alice listened to the story of the engagement without interruption. When Sally had finished, she said, 'Oh dear,' and, after a pause, 'Dear me.'

Sally laughed. 'I do adore you, Alice. No one else would say just that in that mild voice. You should have heard Hugh when I told him, and Simon, when it happened. Shouting, both of them.'

Alice looked very thoughtful. 'You told Hugh Davenport?'

'Yes. I thought I ought to. You see, he's been very kind about the mortgage and the overdraft and all those tiresome things, and sometimes he takes me out. So it seemed better to explain.'

Alice digested this in silence. Did it mean that there was

something more in this friendship than she had imagined? She was inclined to hope not, much though she wanted to see Sally happily married. But so far she had not been very enthusiastic about this rising young barrister; not, that is to say, as Sally's prospective husband. She did not feel that he would make her friend happy, nor, to be just, that Sally was the wife for him. He was an attractive man and bound to go far; straight and decent, thought Alice, and—oh, all the virtues. But not elastic enough for Sally. Elastic was the word. When she said this later to Trevor he smiled and said it was what he'd call an understatement.

To his wife's surprise, he laughed at the story of the engagement. 'How exactly like Sally, rushing in to help a friend and making a mess of things. I'd have liked to see old Simon's face. He must have been pretty furious.'

'If he was, it was very ungrateful of him. She was only trying to help.'

'She always is, but that doesn't make the results any better.'

'And the man who marries her will be jolly lucky.'

'Never a dull moment.'

'How you exaggerate all that. I don't think you really know the other side of Sally.'

'As for example? . . .'

'Well, she's awfully kind to any of the neighbours who need help, and she makes time, however tired she is, to write to that tiresome old great-uncle of hers.'

'That's a new one. I didn't know she had a great-uncle.'

'Yes. He lives in Australia and sounds perfectly mad. Believes in fairies and is always thinking he's seen them. Great-Uncle Aloysius.'

'Aloysius. Well, well. So Sally writes to him. Let's hope he doesn't come and pay her a visit and see fairies in the bush. It would drive old Matt mad.'

'Luckily he's a good distance away. . . . But he's always writing and poor Sally answers. Then there's her lonely sailor, too. That means more letters.'

'A lonely sailor? Sally writes to a lonely sailor? Good God, why?'

'Well, she saw an advertisement in an English paper—a lonely sailor who would be glad of letters, so she wrote.'

'She would. And I suppose he's due any minute?'

'Oh no. Fortunately his ship doesn't come to New Zealand. But the letters all take time and trouble when Sally's tired at night and wants to go to bed, and it's all out of kindness of heart.'

'The root of all evil.'

'Now, Trevor, you know you're very fond of Sally, and so's Simon, and he ought to be flattered at being engaged to her. She's a very attractive girl, and it was most unselfish of her to do it.'

'How, my dear illogical one, do you make that out?'

'Well, no girl likes to be jilted, and that, she says, is what Simon will have to do. Besides, there's Hugh Davenport. It makes it all so complicated.'

'Life with Sally would never be simple. I wonder how Davenport likes this latest caper.'

'She says he was pretty stuffy at first and lectured her as if she was the prisoner at the bar. But he came round later and asked her out to dinner.'

Alice did not add that Sally had said, 'And so we kissed—at least I kissed him—and were friends.' Trevor Moore might regard kisses in a more serious light than Sally did.

The dinner would have been more of a success if Sally had not spied Simon looking extremely gloomy, and sitting alone at a table in the corner. Her unfortunately tender heart was touched at once. 'Oh Hugh, there's poor old Simon, looking wretched.'

Davenport glanced across and said sardonically, 'He certainly doesn't look as if he had just become engaged to a most charming girl.'

She gave him a reproachful glance. This was harping, and Sally hated harping. She said brightly, 'Let's go over and sit at his table and cheer him up.'

It was not a happy inspiration. To begin with, Hugh sighed in a martyred way and followed her with obvious

reluctance. Then Simon did not seem overjoyed to see them; indeed he looked up, saw Sally, and muttered, 'You again', in the most unflattering way.

Sally bristled. He might be a very old friend, but she had grown up in the years since he talked to her like that. She wasn't accustomed to it from young men nowadays. Quite the contrary. Sally was not conceited, but she was fully aware that she was an attractive girl. She said huffily, 'Don't look such a misery. You've got the job.'

'And the girl,' muttered Hugh unforgivably.

The men's eyes met. They had not been attracted to each other at Alice's party, but now there was a sort of comradeship in their glance. It said, 'Women are the devil,' with particular and pointed reference to Sally. Resenting this obvious alliance, Sally, as usual, decided to take the offensive. 'Just suppose Mr Ford were to come in. What would he think to see you looking like that? Why, you ought to be on top of the world.' Then, surprisingly practical, before he could retort, 'When do you start, Simon?'

'On Monday—and Ford wants you to come out soon and have a look at the house.'

There was slight malice in the words and Sally looked dismayed. 'Oh dear, how tiresome of him, though awfully sweet, of course. But I mean . . .' and here Sally yielded to her besetting weakness and began to laugh.

Both men looked at her coldly, and unfortunately this only made her worse. It was the greatest effort to pull herself together when the waitress approached with the menu, and when she had gone Simon was still gloomily surveying his plate and Hugh was absorbed in tracing a pattern on the tablecloth with his fork. At last Sally could bear it no longer and burst out, 'Oh, haven't either of you got the slightest sense of humour? Can't you see how funny it is?'

'No,' said Simon sulkily, and 'No,' said Davenport uncompromisingly.

This unanimity made Sally laugh again, but presently she said severely, 'Now, look here, you two. There's nothing for you to be so gloomy about. The only person who's in trouble



is me. No, Hugh, not I; that's pedantic. I'm the one that has to carry the baby.'

Then it occurred to her that her choice of metaphor was unfortunate and she hurried on, 'I mean, no girl likes being jilted. It's what you might call a set-back, and I've got on rather well so far. However, I can always move on when I sell the farm, though I'd hate to. Because of the Moores, of course.'

She looked hopefully at Hugh who conspicuously refrained from taking his cue. With a sigh she went on, 'You see, if I hadn't stepped in . . .'

'Rushed in,' Simon corrected morosely.

'That's not fair. I didn't even speak. I just let it go. And, if I hadn't, if I'd said, "We're not engaged; we're just old friends," you'd have gone and given him the letter and lost the job and everything would have been simply frightful.'

'It's pretty frightful now. You say no girl likes being jilted; how do you think a man feels about jilting a girl? Talk of set-backs. . . . Everyone will have it in for me. You saw how that old fool Ford fell for you. God knows why, but he did. What's he going to think of me?'

Sally considered this point with some concern and presently said, 'We'll find a way. It can be my fault. I can behave simply frightfully.'

'No trouble about that,' interpolated Hugh unfairly.

Sally looked at him thoughtfully and decided to pay him out. 'I can start flirting with someone else. Hugh, you'd do nicely. I can make myself so conspicuous with you that Simon couldn't be expected to do anything but break the engagement.'

With pleasure, she noted that for once Davenport's face had flushed slightly. Encouraged by this, she went on, 'I'll get myself really talked about. And you needn't look like that, Hugh. It's high time you did something for someone else instead of sitting there looking smug.'

Simon decided that this had gone far enough. Sally seemed to be enjoying herself, and not only making fools of both men but managing to eat a very substantial meal into the bargain. She had always been given to showing off, and he

now told her so with brotherly frankness, adding, 'And, if you think you'll make yourself the talk of the town, just get that idea out of your head.'

'The talk of the town? What would that matter?' and saw with pleasure that both men opened their mouths at the same moment to tell her not to use that ridiculous expression.

When peace was restored, she asked, 'When is Aunt Dorothy due?'

Simon's face cleared. Aunt Dorothy was the one bright spot on the horizon, the one thoroughly sane person in this mad situation. He said, 'She's letting her flat and coming down next week.'

'Well, that makes everything simple. I can go out and see Aunt Dorothy and everyone will be satisfied, even Mr Ford. Unless,' she added thoughtfully, 'he should take it into his head to come too and ask me if I'd like a new bath put in.'

After this, both men decided that it was no use trying to act as restraining influences. Better to laugh, which they managed to do.

It was unfortunate, Sally thought, that on the few occasions when she afforded a trip to town, she seemed invariably to meet Mr Ford. This meant that she was obliged to stop and exchange pleasantries, and Mr Ford's pleasantries were so very Victorian. He had a knowing air whenever he spoke of 'our manager', and once he actually murmured something coy about 'our little secret'. If it hadn't amused Sally, it would have proved embarrassing; as it was she remarked to Hugh that she was afraid the old dear was going to get a terrible shock when she started playing up.

'Playing up?' he repeated coldly. 'What are you contemplating now?'

'Don't be so affected. Hugh. You know perfectly well that I'm going to begin flirting madly with someone, so that Simon will have an excuse for jilting me. You'll do, if no one more likely turns up. But not yet, of course. Simon's got to have time to get established, and show them he's the best manager ever. But that won't take long. He's made a jolly

good start, according to Mr Ford. They'll soon decide they can't do without him, however many girls he jilts. And Aunt Dorothy's a success. I knew she would be.'

For a time, she managed to stave off Mr Ford's pressing suggestions that she should go and see her new home. Then at last Simon called in at the farm one day and said grudgingly, 'I suppose you'd better come. The old joker keeps asking why you haven't visited Luthens yet. Besides, Aunt Dorothy would like to see you again.'

'And I'd like to see her. I'll come on Saturday, if it's a fine day. It'll be fun to see Luthens. I've never been inside the gate. . . . But what about Aunt Dorothy, Simon? What does she know?'

'Know about what?'

'Now, don't start being grumpy. You know perfectly well what I mean. Does Aunt Dorothy know that we're supposed to be engaged?'

'I wouldn't have told her, but of course that old Ford had to blab it out. He was raving about you, as usual.'

'But of course you told her the truth when he'd gone?'

'You're a nice one to urge telling the truth. . . . No, I didn't say any more.'

'But, Simon . . .'

'I know. I know. But it's damned awkward. If I tell her it's all a pretence, she has to lie to Ford, and she won't like doing that. So I just said nothing.'

'But she must have thought that mighty queer.'

'If she did, she didn't say so. She just said how nice it would be to see you again, and how quickly time passed, and how it seemed no time since you were a little girl, living on the next farm, and so on. You know how vague she is.'

Sally knew that vagueness, and profoundly distrusted it. There was no-one shrewder than Dorothy Forster. What was she really thinking? Anyway, of one thing you could be sure. She would never give anything away.

Dorothy Forster, having lost her husband within a year of marriage, and having no children, had largely brought Simon up, retiring only when her brother died and his son went to an

Agricultural College, and had later branched out for himself.

Now she had obligingly left her town flat and come to fill in the break caused by Elizabeth Gray's faithlessness. What would she think of this sudden engagement between two people who had been brought up together and then hardly met for six years? Well, Sally would be able to find out on Saturday.

At first sight, Luthens was not impressive; a cluster of buildings set in a wooded valley, but Sally knew that behind and beyond the valley lay thousands of acres of good grazing country, as well as the flats that made Luthens so prosperous. The woolshed, she was glad to see, was slightly removed from the cluster of houses and cottages, and on a rise stood the largest and most impressive building—for the old homestead had long fallen into disuse. This modern house was obviously the manager's, and round it were the remains of what had once been a good garden. In the garden was Dorothy Forster, working just as energetically, it seemed to Sally, as she had done fifteen years ago, when she was keeping house for Simon and his father.

She greeted the girl with all her old affection, and took her into the house. Rather curiously, she did not refer directly to the engagement, but then Aunt Dorothy seldom referred directly to anything. She chatted on in her disjointed way.

'Such a long time, dear. Actually three years, and you were home for the holidays after studying in Dunedin. I remember how sorry I was that Simon had missed you, because he certainly would have been impressed. "Such a blossoming," I told him afterwards. "You wouldn't know the little girl you teased so unmercifully. . . . So very attractive." '

'And I'll bet Simon said that was impossible.'

Aunt Dorothy refused to commit herself. They were sitting in the small dining-room of the manager's house, drinking coffee. It wasn't an impressive or imaginative house, a square box of a place, with three bedrooms, a comfortable sitting-room, and a minute dining-room. Of course there was the usual large farm kitchen which might be less convenient than the modern kitchenettes, but was, Sally, thought, the place

for a family. She could imagine children doing their lessons at the big table, or playing games round the open fire that stood close to the modern electric stove.

The house had been turned into a home by Aunt Dorothy's unerring touch. Sally looked round at many of the familiar things and said, 'It could have been so stark, and it's lovely. How did you do it?'

Aunt Dorothy had taken up her crochet, and her white head was bent over her work. Sally thought, 'If I've changed, she hasn't. She was always small and neat and—well, sort of cosy. Not fat, but comfortable, with such pretty hands and lovely blue eyes.' It was, she felt sure, even the same crochet, for she couldn't remember Mrs Forster without a piece of crochet in those soft little hands. Those hands were her only vanity, and she invariably wore gloves for gardening or any rough work. Sally used to tease her and tell her that the crochet showed off her pretty hands. It gave her too, that old-fashioned air, although as a matter of fact there was nothing old-fashioned about Aunt Dorothy. Her mind was quick and understanding, and her point of view, if she ever expressed it, surprisingly modern. Yes, Sally thought, the crochet was a sort of protective colouring. You could be as original as you liked if you did crochet, because no-one would believe you capable of an advanced idea. Again she wondered uneasily what Aunt Dorothy really thought of the engagement; presently, when there was a chance, she would tell her the truth, whatever Simon might say.

They chatted easily and happily and the moment for confidence had almost come when, to Sally's horror, she saw a large car draw up at the gate. 'Oh dear, you've got a visitor,' and then, in a tone of dismay, 'It's . . . Oh it can't be . . . But yes, it is. Aunt Dorothy, it's Mr Ford.'

Mrs Forster was unperturbed. 'Such a pleasant man. He said he was coming out one day to see Simon about alterations to the wool-shed. I'm a little sorry he chose today, but after all, dear, he is a great admirer of yours.'

That, thought Sally bitterly, was just the trouble. Samuel Ford was gallant to Mrs Forster but positively coy to Sally.



He said, 'Now, what could be more fortunate than finding the future mistress of the house here, having a look-see on the quiet. . . . And what do you think of it all, my dear?'

Sally said feverishly she thought it was most interesting, and led him away from the subject of the house to talk of the station, in which she was able to show an intelligent interest.

But presently the dreaded moment came. Samuel Ford put down his coffee cup and rose with the words, 'And now, my dear young lady, let us have a word about the house. . . . Have you looked over it properly yet?'

Sally looked wildly round at Aunt Dorothy and murmured about there being plenty of time. Mrs Forster said serenely that she and Sally would go quietly over it together when Simon came in, and he and Mr Ford wanted to talk business. But it was no use. 'No time like the present,' declared Samuel Ford, and led the way into the sitting-room.

'Of course we wouldn't feel justified in any large alterations, but perhaps a new wallpaper here? Something more modern?' Sally murmured that that would be very nice and looked and felt a complete fool. Ford went on, 'The bathroom, now. . . . All mod. cons, of course, but it could do with a new linoleum. Yes, you had better choose one yourself. . . . And now for the bedrooms. This,' leading the way into a large room, 'is the main bedroom. Very nice, don't you think? A pleasant room for a young couple. Yes, I think you'll be comfortable here, but perhaps another window. . . . Of course it all depends on where the bed is to go and . . .'

At this moment, Sally, struggling between embarrassment and a shocking desire to laugh, looked round and saw Simon standing in the doorway, with an expression of quite alarming fury on his face.

And just then Aunt Dorothy came fussily in. 'So nice, making plans,' she beamed, 'but I always say that it's better with paper and pencil on a nice long winter evening. . . . Sally, dear, we'll make our plans and then show them to the men, won't we?'

'Yes, oh yes, that will be splendid,' murmured Sally incoherently, and somehow managed to get out of the room.

'What's up with you?' Matthew asked grumpily. 'Why not go to the party? You must be crook. I thought you was overdoing it yesterday, trying to dig like that, a little thing like you. Silly, that's what you are. What am I here for?'

'To help me and scold and be kind, like Father. . . . But I'm perfectly well. You know I always am,' for Sally, although she was five foot two and weighed seven and a half stone, was tough as a mountain pony.

'Then what's the trouble? Never knew you not keen on a bit of fun. Got an invite to a swell town party, and talking about not going. Got a new dress, too, what your friend made for you while you was acting silly over that tea-room. . . . A new dress and a party. What more do you want?'

His voice pleaded and his old eyes were anxious. He got very cross with her at times, but she was all he had. Matthew had never married but had attached himself to James Leigh in the inarticulate and devoted manner of a faithful dog, and, when James was dying in that sudden way from a coronary occlusion, Matthew had promised to look after his nineteen-year-old girl. That was three years ago, and he had done his best; but it took more than hard work and devotion to make a poor and heavily-mortgaged farm pay, and each of those three years had been a little worse than the last. Now the farm was in the market, and beyond that Matthew Barr did not dare to look.

As if she could read his thoughts, Sally asked suddenly, 'Matthew, if we do sell this farm—and surely it must go soon—what are you and I going to do?'

He flinched. This was the problem that had been worrying

him, suddenly brought out into the open. He said in as cheerful a voice as he could manage, 'There's plenty of jobs goin' for a handy man, and, if there's a good sale, there ought to be money enough left over for you to go and finish that thing you were studying. I can't rightly get hold of the name—like a nurse, but more fancy.'

'My physiotherapy? Oh Matt, it's too late for that, and anyway I'm not going to tuck into some cushy job and desert you. You've stuck by us all these years and never had proper wages, lately no wages at all, just your war pension. Father meant us always to stick together and that's what I want. Oh, we'll get something—a few acres for a market garden, because you're so clever with vegetables, and we might perhaps keep bees . . .'

Here Matthew interrupted to tell her in unvarnished and alliterative language exactly what he thought of bees. She laughed and gave it up, saying merely, 'I'm twenty-two. Too old to start swotting again, and I always found it hard. Oh, we'll get something, and we'll worry about it when the time comes.'

'And who started worrying about it?' asked Matthew with pardonable irritation. 'What I was askin' is why you don't want to go to this party to-night. Time you got to know folks, and this is your chance. These friends of yours, this doctor bloke and his wife, they're making things different for you. People didn't bother before. Now they're taking notice.'

'Oh, I don't think so,' said Sally, who was a modest person. 'They've just asked me because old Mr Lawrence was nice to me at the other party, and besides he's Hugh Davenport's senior partner, and Hugh . . .' Here she hesitated. Not from any false modesty, for Sally had little of this pleasing quality, and none at all when talking to Matthew; she paused because she really didn't know what the position was with Hugh. He was friendly, and had taken her to dinner lately, and sometimes called in at the farm if he was passing or at the week-ends. Certainly he seemed to feel himself privileged to find fault with her, but she was not sure if there was anything

more. Nor, for the matter of that, did she know whether she wanted more.

But Matthew's eyes brightened. He had noticed with approval that the prosperous-looking young lawyer was what he called 'taking an interest'; if Sally could only make a good marriage. . . . He thought of the various young men who had 'taken an interest', during her three years on the farm—a medical student left over from Dunedin days, a stock agent, and two young farmers. None of them, in his prejudiced eyes, good enough for the girl whom he scolded and grumbled at so incessantly, and loved so devotedly.

With laborious tact he ignored the reference to Davenport and merely said, 'Why not go to the blasted party? There's that dress. You made fuss enough about it at the time, sayin' you couldn't afford it and all that. Now you've got it, and we've paid the telephone bill, so why not wear it?'

'I can't start accepting invitations when I can't afford to return them, and somehow it seems wrong to go to parties when we're on our beam ends. The worst of it is that, once I get there, I forget all about the mortgage and selling the farm, and just have a good time. It's so selfish when you're left here.'

'Well, you don't want me to go to your party?' asked Matthew with wry humour. 'Pretty I'd look with all them swells. . . . Now, off you go and have a fling. There mayn't be many ahead unless things look up.'

In spite of these cheering words, Sally allowed herself to be persuaded. Of course something would turn up. She only laughed when Matthew shook his head lugubriously at this and called a gay farewell to the old man.

'I'll be back to-night whatever happens. It may be one o'clock but I'll certainly come, and you're not to sit up.'

'Why not stay the night with those Moores?'

'No, I want to help you foot-rot those ewes in the morning.'

'Well, see you go careful and don't have an accident.' These were always his parting words, although he was the first to admit that Sally was a very good driver.

It was a curious household, the sixty-year-old man and this

young girl. When Mr Leigh died, the neighbours had said, 'She'll have to get some woman to live with her.' But no one said it to Sally, and the idea never occurred to her. Matthew had lived with them as long as she could remember; of course they would go on in the same way. Because the people round were used to the arrangement, no one commented on it; her new town friends, the people she had met at Alice's party and who now showed an inclination to cultivate her, found it all rather original and amusing. To Sally it was completely natural. Matthew was the comfort of her life and at times its greatest trial. They would stick together when the farm was sold.

Not that she was worrying about the future that evening at the party, for it was her firm conviction, that if you couldn't forget your worries at a party, you should stay at home. She was in her element once more, in a pretty frock, with old Mr Lawrence chivalrously admiring and Hugh Davenport in open critical attendance.

Alice was telling them of the great-uncle to whom Sally wrote so faithfully. 'Aloysius,' someone repeated. 'I've always wanted to meet an Aloysius, but I didn't think one really existed. What's he like?'

'Frightfully queer from his letters. He never writes about anything except fairies and he's madly keen on them, calls them "the little people" and is writing a book about them. He declares he's seen them. . . . Poor old man, I think it's because he's led such a dull life, working in an insurance office. That would make him believe in fairies.'

'I should think it would have the opposite effect,' remarked Hugh with calm logic, but Sally contended that if you had a dull life you had to have some form of escape, and looked triumphant at her own discernment.

'You must like writing letters,' Mr Lawrence said.

'Oh no. I hate it. It's the last straw when one comes in tired at night.'

'Then why do it?' asked Trevor Moore. 'Alice tells me that you correspond with some lonely sailor too.'

There was amusement at this but Sally gravely explained



that she had seen an advertisement in an English paper asking someone to write to a lonely sailor, and that she had done so on the spur of the moment. 'And it's two years ago and I'm still doing it,' she said sadly, 'and air mail's frightfully expensive.'

'How old is your lonely sailor?' Hugh asked with interest.

'Oh, quite young, but he thinks I'm old. His granny had just died when he advertised, and I've taken her place.'

'Rather awkward if he turns up at your door.'

'He won't do that. His ship doesn't come to New Zealand. He likes my letters. I try to mother him and give him good advice.'

'Sally,' said Trevor Moore very solemnly, 'be careful. Some day some of your chickens will come home to roost.'

'Well, the lonely sailor won't, and I think Uncle Aloysius is safe in Australia. He's too old to travel, and I don't expect he's got any money.'

Everyone declared that Sally was a very kind little girl, and it was left to Hugh to dispel the glow of self-satisfaction which their praise had induced. When, presently, Sally was dancing with him, he murmured, 'How's your fiancé? Another of your good deeds. But that one went a bit wrong.'

In spite of this remark, Hugh was, on the whole, kind and attentive, and Sally felt once again the excited pleasure which his attentions produced. It was a lovely party, she thought, and the only flaw was that the Moores had to leave early. Trevor explained that they had an English cousin arriving by the early plane and that he must be up in time to meet her at the aerodrome.

Sally's curiosity, as usual, was roused. 'Who is she and what's she like?' she asked Alice as her friend was putting on her coat in Mrs Lawrence's bedroom.

'I don't know. She's only Trevor's second, once removed. Quite pretty from her photograph, and she says she's frightfully keen on the country and wants to see what our sheep stations are like.'

'But hasn't she been on farms in England?'

'Only an orchard in Devon, and a dairy farm somewhere.'

She's lived always in London and she pines, she says, for the great open spaces. She sounds rather intense.'

But Sally was excited. 'Never mind the intenseness. Men like it if it's about the things they're keen on. Oh Alice, I'm sure it's *meant*.'

'Meant? What do you mean? I'm rather dreading it.'

'Meant for Simon, of course. Don't you see? Why, she's just what we want—nice and pretty and keen on the country. She'll do splendidly for Simon. Ever so much better than that nasty Elizabeth who was only keen on culture.'

Alice laughed. 'Sally, you mustn't . . .' she began, and then knew it was hopeless. If Sally was determined to do her best for Simon, nothing would stop her.

When the time came for her to go, Hugh went with her to her old car. 'Just to see that it starts,' he explained patronisingly.

'My car has its faults, but it always starts,' Sally boasted, but Hugh ignored her. This was a good thing, for, when she tried the self-starter, an ominous whizzing was the only result. Sally struggled for some minutes, said 'Damn' very loudly, and then, 'Push her, Hugh. Nasty old thing. She must have heard me boasting.'

Hugh commented that after all she had done a good deal of boasting that evening, but he pushed valiantly, and, because Mr Lawrence's house was on top of a hill, his efforts were successful. Slowly and reluctantly the car began to move, and then gathered speed as the rise became steeper. Unfortunately, the engine did not respond and, when she reached the flat ground, the car sat heavily and determinedly in the roadway and showed no intention of taking her home.

This was maddening. It was a long way to the farm and Matthew would be listening for her return. She was at the far end of the town from the Moores' house and was most unsuitably dressed for a long walk. She could not afford an hotel and knew nobody else well enough to ask for a bed. What was she to do?

The answer came as Hugh's car overtook her and pulled up.

For once he did not attempt any caustic comment but said, 'Where's your starting handle?'

'Starting handle?' Sally repeated vaguely. 'Oh dear, I remember using it to open a box when I couldn't find a hammer. . . . I must have left it in the shed.'

Hugh sighed rather noisily and then said, 'Hop in. I'll take you to a pub.'

'I'm not going to a pub. It costs the earth. I'm surprised at your suggesting it. You ought to know perfectly well that I can't afford it. After all, you're my lawyer.'

'Then I'd better drive you home.'

'Thank you very much, Hugh, but what about the car? I'll have to get it back. We can't manage without it, and there's no bus to bring me in.'

To her amazement Hugh said, 'Then take my car. I'll get a garage to fix yours. I think it's just the self-starter. I'll bring it out tomorrow evening and collect mine.'

Did he really mean that she was to take his beautiful new car? Of course he had several times unwillingly admitted that she was a very good driver, but she knew that men did not readily lend their cars to even the best female drivers. She said slowly, 'That's very kind of you, but I wouldn't like to borrow anyone's car.'

Patiently he asked, 'Then what do you propose to do? You won't let me take you to an hotel. What about driving you to the Moores?'

Sally hesitated. It was very late, and Alice had looked tired. She remembered the English cousin who was arriving early. It would be selfish to knock them up at this hour. She said so, and Hugh said kindly, 'Come along, my girl. Take the blasted car. We can't stand here arguing all night. You won't bust the car up and I'll bring yours out tomorrow evening and ask myself to dinner.'

It was so jolly and friendly, so much more like Simon than Hugh, that Sally consented and was so filled with gratitude that she took a too-affectionate farewell of her deliverer.

She drove soberly back to the farm, to see, as she had expected, a light burning in the sitting-room. In spite of all her

protests, Matthew had sat up for her. Thank goodness she had not yielded to weariness and stayed in town, asking Hugh for a loan which would be repaid at the earliest opportunity—Sally could not imagine how.

The old man had been dozing by the fire and was so relieved to see her back that he was more grumpy than usual.

'Well, why didn't you go to bed?' she asked reasonably, when he was grumbling about the hours townsfolk kept.

'No use going to bed when for all I knew you might be dead on the road. Besides, I wanted to see you locked the car up all right. Know what you are, come runnin' in and as likely as not leave the keys in and never think to lock the garage door, though I put a good Yale lock on it the other day.'

'But why lock it? We hardly ever do, and the car's perfectly safe.'

'That's all you know. Jack Simmonds just rang up a while ago to say someone had pinched his new Vauxhall.'

'Oh, poor Mr Simmonds. Still, if the thief's taken his car, they won't want ours,' and then, suddenly remembering, 'But oh dear, it isn't our car. It's Mr Davenport's lovely new one.'

Matthew looked alarmed. 'Talking nonsense, that's what you are. Better go to bed. I'll see to the car. . . . What would Mr Davenport's car be doing here?'

Sally explained, and said, 'I simply must rush out and lock everything up. It would be awful if anything happened to Hugh's car.'

Matthew agreed heartily. Never do to have that car stolen. Put the lawyer bloke off for good, and it was a hopeful sign that he had lent Sally his car. Chaps didn't go lending cars unless they had intentions. Things were looking up.

Sally was most meticulous. She shut the big garage doors, snibbed the Yale lock, and took the precaution of locking the small door, for, although no car could be removed that way, the thief might steal Hugh's new spare tyre. Whatever happened, Hugh's car must be safe. She would like him to see how trustworthy she was, for he had a way of inferring that she was a most scatty and unreliable person.

The next day was occupied in the revolting task of helping Matthew to foot-rot old ewes, and at four o'clock, when they had finished, he announced that he had to strain up a wire on the back fence and then take the borrowed wire strainer back to the neighbour who had lent it. He wouldn't be back till fairly late and she could just keep his dinner for him.

'Don't do that to-night. You've worked long enough. When I've had my bath I'll run one for you. We're both horribly smelly.'

Matthew remarked sourly that, as he was going to the furthest paddock, Sally would not have to smell him, and did she want the bull to get in with those old cows they meant to sell? Sally thought that his was merely an excuse; Matthew was determined to leave her alone with Hugh.

She was in her prettiest frock when Davenport arrived. Accustomed to seeing her in her usual farm jeans, he looked at her with approval. Though no beauty, Sally was certainly a pretty girl.

'Got home all right? I've brought back your car. Nothing much wrong with it, only the self-starter. It won't be a big bill.'

'Thank goodness for that. Yes, I had a lovely peaceful drive, and I locked your car up safely because there was a car stolen near here last night. We'll get it presently, when you've had some tea.'

Tea was not a beverage to which Hugh was addicted at 5 p.m., but he knew better than to bring a bottle out with him. He had once ventured to do this and the bottle had returned in his car, unopened, for Sally did not take kindly to presents of that kind. They sat talking happily and, for once, Hugh was understanding and appreciative. Sally basked in his amiability and decided that she liked him very much indeed.

Presently he rose. 'I'd better get the car out now because I'm afraid I'll have to rush away to a meeting very soon after dinner. It's at the office at 7.30 and I mustn't be late, so just give me the key.'

'Of course,' said Sally, looking very business-like and efficient and going to the desk where she usually kept all



keys. . . . The garage key was not there, and she had a moment of panic; what had she done with it when she locked the door? It had been after one o'clock and she was very tired. She had no memory at all of the wretched thing.

Determined to hide her carelessness from Hugh she said lightly, 'Just sit and read the paper and I'll get the key in a minute,' and rushed outside. Had she left it in the door after all her precautions? It wasn't there. Hopefully she pushed at the double door. The Yale lock held fast and she remembered that she had put down the safety catch on the inside. She simply had to find the key. . . . Could she have dropped it as she came inside? Slowly she retraced her steps, eyes searching the ground. No key. She came in, made a bright and forced remark to Hugh, and searched her evening bag, then her coat pocket, then her dressing-table, and was reduced to crawling under the bed to see if it could have been dropped, when she looked up and saw Hugh standing at the door.

'I suspected it. You've lost the garage key,' he said, in a tone melancholy and yet triumphant. For a moment Sally had a wholly primitive desire to hit him.

'Nonsense. It's not lost. It can't be far away.'

'That's the typical remark of the loser,' he said nastily, and Sally retorted hotly, 'I put it away in a perfectly safe place. I'm sure of that.'

'Another typical remark. Now you've only to say that you had it a minute ago, and you'll have run through the lot.'

'You're being positively hateful. If you'd any niceness at all, you'd help look.'

Hugh decided that he was being rather unpleasant, but he was feeling impatient. Above all else he liked orderliness and reliability. Sally had shown neither. He needed his car badly, and he could not miss that meeting. The girl might be attractive but she was too undependable for words. She was searching in all the most unlikely places now, in the sink cupboard, in the saucepans, in Matt's room, and even in the flour bin, saying seriously, 'I was so anxious for it to be safe, and no one ever looks in a flour bin for a garage key.'

In the pauses of her search she was attending to the dinner,

which certainly smelt appetising, and telling him that of course the key was somewhere about; it was just a question of using your imagination.

At last he said, 'I've got to get that car out somehow. Let me have a look at that door.'

'Oh, it's a splendid door. So strong. I knew the car would be perfectly safe last night,' she said with a sort of wan pride that induced in him the impulse either to shake her or to kiss her. Resisting both, he said, 'Perhaps I can force the lock?'

But Sally said, 'Oh no. That's quite impossible. If I'd thought anyone could do that, I'd have been terribly uneasy about your car.'

They went together to the garage and Hugh shook the door hopefully, twisted the handle of the smaller door, and tried to do something intricate and clever with a piece of wire.

'What a pity you don't know how to pick a lock,' Sally said regretfully. 'I always wish someone would teach me. I'm sure it'd come in handy.' To which he replied sourly that unfortunately it was not included in the curriculum for a legal education.

As a last resort he examined the screws of the smaller door and then said a little doubtfully, 'If you'll get me a screw-driver, I'll take this little door off its hinges and then I can get in and open the other door from the inside.'

'A screw-driver?' Sally looked round hopefully as if she expected to see one growing on a tree; then she said in a small voice, 'If only Matt were here. He'd know. But he's right at the back of the farm. I wonder now . . .'

In a voice of painful restraint Davenport said, 'Surely you've got a screw-driver in your car?'

'In my car?' Sally sounded genuinely shocked. 'Oh, I never carry tools in my car. It's just asking for trouble.'

Hugh looked at her thoughtfully. What exactly did she mean by that? Then he decided to let it go and began to search the tool-shed while Sally hovered distractedly between him and the dinner. It must not be spoilt; there was just a chance that, if it was particularly good, Hugh would recover from

his ill-temper. At last the tool was unearthed and he set to work. He was not clever with tools but he had the sense to ignore both Sally's advice and help, and so at last had the door lying on the ground and his car released.

Returning rather dourly to the house, he was slightly ashamed of his own irritability when he sat down to an excellent dinner and Sally said sadly, 'I know we ought to drink something, but I just don't keep it. It would be wrong with what you call "the state of my finances", wouldn't it?'

It was when she was making coffee that she gave a glad cry. 'Why, here's the key all the time, in the coffee percolator. I knew I'd put it in a perfectly safe place, where no thief could possibly find it,' and then, to his own surprise, Hugh burst out laughing.

He had hardly gone when Matthew returned, so suddenly that Sally was uncomfortably certain that he had been lurking in the wood-shed until her visitor departed. She gave him his dinner and a spirited account of their struggles with the door. To her disappointment, he was not amused.

'You don't want to do that sort of thing,' he said disapprovingly. 'Shows you up, that does. A chap wants a woman to be reliable-like. It isn't enough to have a pretty face—not that yours is anything out of the ordinary, but it's right enough. But that isn't enough. A man wants more than that in a . . . in a . . .'

'In a what?' Sally asked sharply, for once irritated with her old friend. 'Now, Matt, don't go getting ideas. Hugh Davenport's not the marrying sort, and when he does want a wife he'll look for someone with money and position,' and thought to herself, 'Someone like that Elizabeth Gray.'

She was still brooding on Elizabeth's unfaithfulness when there was a knock at the door and, to her surprise, Simon came in. It was the first time he had been to the farm and she had not seen him since that last unfortunate encounter with Mr Ford.

Simon greeted Sally coldly and Matthew with enthusiasm.

'Good to see you again, Matt; you're looking very spry in spite of the leg. How is it these days?'

They chatted happily. Matthew had always liked Simon, and now he brought back memories of the good days when he and James Leigh had run that other farm together and the world had seemed full of hope.

Presently Sally said, 'I can rake you up some dinner, or has Aunt Dorothy fed you to repletion?'

He told her that he had dined and she proceeded to give him a bright account of the affair of the locked door, as she called it. He laughed in rather a half-hearted way and presently said, 'Aunt Dorothy wants you to come to Luthens again. She says she hadn't nearly enough of you that day, and old Ford keeps asking why you keep away. Better to come perhaps—that is, if you're determined to keep up this silly game.'

It was not graciously said, but Sally did not resent his tone. It was easy to see that Simon was unhappy and he had always been inclined to take it out of her when this happened. It was difficult for him, and something would have to be done about it. She had not been trying very hard to find a substitute for Elizabeth, but now there was a hope. For already Sally had decided that Alice's English cousin was destined to solve all their problems. What could be better than a pretty girl who loved the idea of a country life? She said, 'All right, I'll come, but what about Aunt Dorothy coming here first? Let's have a little party. Matt, we could run to a few bottles of beer and some sherry, couldn't we?'

'Reckon that wouldn't break us,' he admitted and Sally thought unhappily that probably he would insist on making the purchase out of his own pension.

'Just a few of us, you and Aunt Dorothy, and Matt, Alice and Trevor and a girl they've got staying with them, and perhaps Hugh Davenport.'

Simon hesitated and she realised that, since Elizabeth's defection, he had lost interest in parties. She said, 'Do come. They're all old friends except for this girl, Nan Reading. She's

a cousin from England and I want to do something to entertain her. Simon dear, don't say no.'

He had never been able to resist her when she spoke like that, nor, he reflected gloomily, had anyone else. Particularly Samuel Ford who was making Simon's life a misery by continually enquiring in conspiratorial tones about 'the little lady'. He said, 'All right. Fix a day and we'll be there, but all the same, Sally, you'll have to put in an appearance at Luthens, or else tell Mr Ford that the whole thing was just a silly joke.'

Sally glanced uneasily at Matthew who was looking suspicious, and changed the subject hurriedly, 'How's the station getting on?' and managed skilfully to steer the conversation to the various problems that Simon was tackling. The result was that, when Simon came to go, he realised ruefully that he had not delivered the ultimatum with which he had come armed. He had not told her that he would not keep up this silly pretence, that it wasn't fair to her, or, for the matter of that, to him. But he left without saying it, and Simon thought as he drove home that Sally was like that; she twisted you round so that you thought that she was both right and wise. And of course she was neither.

When he had gone, Sally went slowly back into the sitting-room, where Matthew was pretending to read the paper. She wished now that she had told the old man about this pretended engagement at the beginning; now she would have to do so, because of Simon's rash remark about a 'silly joke. It was going to be difficult.

'What's up now?' he growled. 'Been into some fresh mischief?'

'I was going to tell you all about it, but I was afraid you'd scold, and really Simon does enough of that,' and then the story came out.

When she had finished, Matthew said nothing for a moment and then got slowly to his feet. 'That's cooked it,' he said, and his voice was heavy with doom. 'Lost your best chance, that's what you done. If this goes on, and Simon chucks you over, who's goin' to look at you? No one wants a girl what's



been thrown over by another man, and that lawyer chap was just the goods.'

Sally was touched by his despair. 'Don't worry, Matt. It'll work out. People will understand, and, if some of them don't, what does it matter?'

'That's you all over,' he retorted crossly. 'What does it matter? You said that when you was ten and fell off your pony, and afterwards we found your arm was broke. You says it when you have to give up that course you was working at, which would have brought you in a nice little income. But no; you comes back here and now, when the farm's near bankrupt and you could have got a rich bloke, you says "What does it matter?" Well, it matters to me,' and he limped off without saying another word.

Sally sat by the fire thinking. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps if did matter. Perhaps she had played with fire once too often. . . . Oh well, there was nothing to do about it now.

Sally rang Alice Moore the next morning, for she felt that she must start at once on her good deed of bringing Simon and the English cousin together. But Trevor answered and said that Alice was out for the moment. Did Sally want anything or merely to gossip?

'I want Alice to bring Nan Reading out to the farm as soon as she can. What's she like, Trevor? Do tell me, unless of course she's within hearing.'

'That's all right. She's out with Alice. What's she like? Oh, all right. Easy on the eye, but a bit too precious for me.'

'Precious? How do you mean?'

'Inclined to be soulful and quote poetry. I took her when I had to go out to the country the other day and she talked about "great open spaces" and all that.'

Sally laughed. 'That's because she doesn't know much about them. Alice said she's never been on an ordinary sheep-farm.'

'No. Very English, and London at that. Got all sorts of ideas about sheep kings and wide fields. Says the country's full of romance.'

'I haven't noticed it. Never mind, she probably means well. Ask Alice to bring her to the farm soon and she'll be disillusioned.'

But that, Sally privately thought, was just what Nan must not be. She must continue to cherish her ideals about 'the great open spaces' until she had seen Luthens and Simon.

Alice rang her that afternoon. 'It's all right. I'm alone in the house. How wrong of Trevor to make fun of Nan, be-

cause she's really very nice. He doesn't understand a poetical nature, and he just thinks it's gush.'

'But will Simon understand it? You know how he hates gush.'

'Now Sally, you simply mustn't cherish hopes of that. . . . Still, she might do quite well. She's pretty and frightfully enthusiastic about the country.'

'We'll take her to Luthens as soon as we can. . . . Seriously, Alice, something must be done. I saw Simon last night and he's getting quite morose. He does so hate being engaged to me.'

'No one could accuse you of being conceited. Simon ought to be flattered to be engaged to you. Well, I do hope they like each other and that she doesn't go too poetical. . . . But isn't it too soon after Elizabeth Gray for Simon to take an interest?'

'I don't think so. I think that was just an infatuation and, when she behaved in that horrid way, Simon woke up and saw he'd been a fool. No, I think it's just the right moment. On the rebound, you know. . . . When will you come out? I've got to make friends with her before I hurl her at Simon's head.'

It was arranged for the following day, and Sally spent an anxious hour trying to make the old place attractive. At all costs, Nan's ideas about the beauty of country life must be encouraged. The rooms of the farm-house were large, with old-fashioned high ceilings and windows, but Sally had some good furniture and plenty of books. As a rule she did not spend much time on housework, but today she carefully polished and dusted, filled the vases with flowers, and hurriedly cleaned the tall windows, hoping that the curtains would not look too faded if she pulled them back. She had done this several times lately when the land agent had rung to say that he was bringing a buyer, but her efforts had been unavailing. The buyer's wife had invariably looked disparagingly at the high ceilings, the wide verandah, the large farm kitchen, had murmured something to her husband, and then they had faded away.

But to-day it was different. Alice always made her feel her old home attractive, and she had the noble feeling that she was doing all this for Simon's sake. If the English girl was really nice, she would appreciate the pleasant and unconventional comfort of the farm-house.

Sally's hopes rose high when she met Nan Reading. She was a dark, attractive girl with very large eyes and a yearning expression. 'Soulful,' Sally decided, 'but she can't help that, and she's really pretty.' Certainly she was a little unusual, for her voice was more 'English' than Sally would have thought possible, high and fluting and obviously suited to the recital of poetry. This, Sally felt, must if possible be avoided when she met Simon. Certainly she was inclined to gush and to be positively lyrical about the view, but that came, Sally told herself firmly, from a kind heart, and a kind heart was far more important than a reserved manner.

'Marvellous to be on a farm,' Nan fluted, gazing ecstatically across the paddocks to where Matthew was at work, his back stolidly turned. 'How wonderful a girl like you running a sheep and cattle farm. . . . How do you manage about shearing the wool and branding the cattle?'

'Oh, I don't really run the farm. Matt does. He's always lived with us and he knows all about a farm. I just help him. Shearing? We get men for that, of course.'

'Do show me your wool-shed. I've read all about them, and the wonderful shearers who work so quickly. It must be a great sight,' Nan said dreamily.

Sally was startled. She had no love for wool-sheds, nasty smelly places where you worked hard and sweatily, picking up endless fleeces and filling pens. She had to admit that her farm did not possess a wool-shed. 'I must take you to one of the big stations to see that. There's one not far away,' she said with great cunning, and explained that they drove their sheep to a neighbour's shed because it had never been worth their while to go to the expense of building one, installing machines and so on. 'Of course it's a nuisance having to drive the sheep, but the farm's for sale anyway, and the next people can build a wool-shed if they want to.'

Her voice was a little sad, and Nan's yearning eyes were filled with sympathy. 'How dreadful to have to sell your farm, to part with the lovely fields and broad meadows,' Nan said and her voice was low and thrilling.

Sally looked awkward and rather wanted to giggle. However, when Nan forgot to be soulful, she was surprisingly practical and full of questions about farming. Sally found herself exchanging a triumphant glance with Alice. This was the right sort of girl for Simon and for Luthens, and Simon would soon get her out of the habit of talking like that. 'She'll be far better than me for Luthens,' Sally thought, and then added hastily, 'Even if I wanted to be really engaged to Simon and I don't.' This girl was full of enthusiasm and high ideals about the land; Sally loved her farm, but her own experience of the last three years had left her with little enthusiasm and fewer ideals.

The land, she thought, was all right, but you had to have money. It wasn't much fun farming if you dreaded the mail every day because of the bills it would bring, and if you had a mortgage that sat on your chest at night—or would, if you let it, amended Sally, who seldom allowed her worries to keep her awake, being happily and mistakenly convinced that something would happen to solve all her problems.

As they talked, she had her moments of misgiving. Did Nan rather overdo her love of the great open spaces and the beauty of nature? (Yes, she really used both of those expressions.) Simon was such a practical person. He might be put off by so much poetry. He had a deep aversion for what he called 'gush'. She hoped that Nan would not be quite so starry-eyed when she went to Luthens.

Sally had decided that this visit must be made as quickly as possible. The big wool-shed would probably clinch things. Her mind was busy planning ahead. She would give this party so that Nan and Simon might meet; then they would arrange a day for the whole party to visit Luthens so that Nan could breathe deeply in the great open spaces and gaze upon the broad acres. To her horror, Sally found that she was beginning even to think in clichés.



Matthew came back to the house before the visitors left. As usual, he firmly refused to come into the sitting-room and he made himself some tea in the kitchen. But his injured air disappeared when Alice, whom he liked very much, came out and sat talking to him. In spite of this, he managed to overhear a good deal of the girls' conversation, and, when they had gone, he remarked sourly to Sally that 'the girl with the plum in her mouth is too full of gush and gabble for me.'

Sally was indignant. 'She's a very nice girl, even if she does talk about the great open spaces,' she said, but Matthew merely replied that the great open spaces were too blinking open for him, especially when you had to muster the sheep from the top paddock in a bloody gale, and that a man wouldn't be keen to come home at night to that sort of talk. Sally refused to be depressed. She told herself that a nice enthusiastic girl who saw romance and poetry in a wool-shed—which had certainly completely eluded Sally—was just the type to banish the memory of the superior and scornful Elizabeth Gray from Simon's mind. She would arrange the party for that week and she was sure it would be a success and Simon certainly attracted to Nan.

It was a great excitement for Sally to give a party, even though the people who were coming were her intimate friends. Aunt Dorothy had rung up from Luthens and said that she happened to have made more mince pies than they could cope with, and that (apparently in an absent-minded moment) she had slipped an extra cake into the oven. 'So don't trouble to bake, dear child, because people never eat very much at a party and this is a very large cake.'

It seemed, Sally thought self-consciously, like a case of 'ladies a plate' for Alice also rang that Sally was too busy to cut sandwiches so they were bringing them; 'and one or two odds and ends, like savouries. You see, there are two of us and it's quite easy; besides I've got to get even with you for what you provided for the tea-room,' she said gaily. Although she protested, Sally was secretly relieved, for she was

rather an erratic cake-maker. 'Sometimes they're brilliant successes, and sometimes I just slip out quietly and give them to the hens,' she told Hugh, who arrived early.

The remark seemed to annoy Matthew. Why did Sally have to run herself down to this most eligible man? 'There's not a better dinner cook than you,' he said crossly. 'And that's what a chap wants—a good roast dinner with all the trimmings when he comes in hungry and tired. Not a lot of creamy cakes what melt in your mouth and don't fill your belly.'

'A good plain cook, that's me,' cried Sally gaily, and tried to ignore Matt's muttered remonstrance. 'Silly sort of way to talk,' he grumbled. There was no doubt that Matthew was doing his best to boost her in the eyes of this admirer, Sally thought; and then wondered if he really was an admirer at all, and, if he was, if she was more than merely mildly flattered.

She was certainly not looking like a plain cook to-night. Her cheeks were flushed and her hazel eyes were bright. Glancing in a mirror as she went past it, Sally decided that she was looking her best, not beautiful in a dark still way like Alice, nor handsome and soulful like Nan, but passable all the same. She wished her skin was not tanned by the sun and wind, and that her hands did not show, in spite of all her care, that she had worked very hard, indoors and out. Still, thought Sally, this was not the moment to worry about that; indeed, if she had been a little more unselfish, she would have thought it a very good thing for Simon to notice the contrast between Nan's beautifully kept hands and her small rough ones. Then she sighed. The truth was that she was not really unselfish; she did not want to shine.

The important thing was for Simon and this English girl to make friends. Not to fall headlong in love, for that was not Simon's way, and he would be sure to be more cautious than ever after the disillusionment of Elizabeth Gray. All she could hope for tonight was that they would make friends, that Nan would talk on the subjects that interested Simon, about the land, about English farming, and about her love of country

life. Talk enthusiastically but not poetically, because Simon distrusted poetry.

And in this it seemed that her plans were successful. With the help of Alice's quiet tact, the two soon began to talk. Simon was not perhaps as interested as he might have been in hop-growing and Devonshire cream, and he looked alarmed when Nan spoke of 'emerald fields', but here Sally interposed quickly and brought the conversation back to safe dull subjects like fertiliser. 'What are you using on Luthens?' she asked, and after that it was simple. Nan was no fool and took her cue, leading Simon on to talk of his work and its difficulties, and of the routine of a large station. She listened absorbed, and in no time the party had divided into little groups and Nan and Simon were left in each other's company.

As usual, on any social occasion, Matthew managed to be of the party and yet not with it. He succeeded in finding a good many odd jobs in the kitchen, and, when Sally insisted on his joining them, hovered uncomfortably in the doorway, talking mostly to Dr Moore and watching Sally with a mixture of disapproval and pride. Why did she leave Hugh Davenport to Alice? Not that Mrs Moore wasn't a very nice lady, but why did the girl seem so indifferent to him? All very well for a little, thought Matthew, but a man wants a bit of notice and flattery. Didn't the girl realise that she'd very likely never have another chance like it? He kept giving her uneasy glances from the doorway.

As a matter of fact, Sally was not thinking about Hugh at all. She was wondering about Aunt Dorothy. What did she really think about this pretended engagement? She had given nothing away on the occasion of Sally's unfortunate visit, and now she sat quietly in her corner, listening to everybody's talk, merely putting in a casual word or two. Sally was unhappy about her. She longed to run to her, as she had often done in her motherless childhood, and tell her all about it; she hated to think of deceiving this good friend. She wanted to say, 'It's all nonsense. Simon isn't engaged to me. It's just pretence.' But, when she had suggested this to Simon, he had

said briefly, 'Don't bring Aunt Dorothy into this. She isn't a happy liar like you. It would upset her,' and had left her to realise once more that the fault was all hers and that she must bear the consequences.

Privately, Sally thought he was wrong. She didn't believe Aunt Dorothy really thought she would marry Simon. Nor did she think that having to keep up the pretence would have upset her. In Sally's knowledge of Aunt Dorothy, she had never been upset by anything. It would be horrid if she thought that they were making a fool of her. Sally longed for her support, for her influence on Simon. If only that silly old Mr Ford hadn't arrived at the wrong moment, it would have been so easy to explain, but now it had become difficult and complicated. Sally heaved a sigh and once more regretted that moment of impulsive folly.

But at least, she reflected as she went to bed, the party had been a success. Her only fear was that Nan might overdo the girlish enthusiasm. She had had to interpose several times when the English girl began to quote poetry, but had not been quick enough to prevent her telling Simon that 'As a great man has said, "God made the country; man made the town".' Simon had looked decidedly embarrassed at that.

Next day, when Alice rang her for a good gossip because Nan was out with the doctor, Sally mentioned this and asked her friend if it would not be possible to whisper a word of warning. 'Make Simon out a strong silent man who likes a girl to be the quiet type and is a bit nervous of poetry. Say that the more they love the land, the less they like to talk about it. She's nice, Alice, and just the very wife for Simon. It would be too bad if she frightened him away.'

Alice agreed and promised to do what she could. 'I think Nan liked him, and I've got a sort of feeling that she wants to marry a New Zealand sheep farmer.'

Sally was rather shocked. 'You don't mean that she came out here to try to find one? And she's so pretty. Lots of men would like to marry her.'

'That's just it. I think she made this flying trip—and she's only supposed to stay a week with us—just to get away

from an admirer and make up her mind. Perhaps Simon will be the answer to her problem, and I do so hope he is, for your sake, because it's all a little difficult. I mean, Hugh Davenport and everything.'

'Oh, what does that matter? Hugh ought to be able to take it. I'm not worrying about Hugh. What I want is to give Simon the chance to get to know Nan. Couldn't you ask them to dinner or something?'

'Of course I will, and you must come too.'

'Oh no, Alice, not for worlds. I mean, of course I love coming to your house and seeing darling Alister—and Trevor too—but I'm just the one to keep away just now. I make Simon awkward. He sort of glares at me, and that makes him so unattractive. Far better to have him by himself.'

And this Alice did, and reported that the evening had been a success. 'I managed to drop a hint about strong silent men with lots of deep feelings and passions (poor Simon, how furious he'd be!) but they didn't like talking about how much they loved the land. So she was much less gushing and just showed an intelligent interest, and they got on splendidly. I really think, Sally, that there's a slight hope. He's coming again tomorrow night, supposed to watch T.V., but I'll see that they get a chance alone together.'

Sally reported this success to Matthew, who, as usual, disapproved. 'Silly sort of way you're goin' on. Fall between two stools, that's what you'll do. Not that Simon would have been my choice for you. Not enough money and sort of takes you for granted. But he'd be better than nothing. And now you're letting this other chap, this lawyer, go cold on it, what with losing keys and making out you're a bad cook, and pretending to be engaged.'

Sally laughed at this recital of her shortcomings and said, 'Well, it's a question of love me or leave me. It's no use pretending to be what I'm not. I do lose keys and make heavy cakes and get into fixes like this one with Simon—though I must say it's the worst one yet. But if all that puts Hugh off, it's better for him to know beforehand, isn't it?'



With which Matthew did not at all agree. In his private opinion, the important thing was for Sally to catch the man. The farm seemed pretty hopeless. They would sell it eventually, but there wouldn't be much left over after the mortgage was paid. It was all very well to talk about a market garden and all that, but Matthew was over sixty and there was no future for Sally in being tied to a lame old man with no money. He felt quite desperate when he saw that she refused to take this rising young lawyer seriously. He seemed the only answer.

He looked so depressed that Sally burst out laughing. 'Matt, don't go on as if I was forty and this was my last chance. I'm twenty-two, and there's plenty of good fish in the sea.' After which vulgar remark she went on thoughtfully, 'But really it is a little awkward about Simon. Mr Ford rang me to-day and said they'd start altering that damned bedroom as soon as they knew what I wanted. . . . I'll have to go out there soon and do something about it.'

'A nice mess you've got yourself into. Bedrooms indeed. What next? I wonder what your father would have said about all this talk of bedrooms.'

'You know quite well that he'd have laughed, and told me I'd been very rash, and I'd have promised him not to do anything silly again, and when I did he'd have forgiven me,' and Sally's voice shook a little.

Fortunately for Matthew's peace of mind, things seemed to look promising. Hugh had taken her to dinner and a play, and Alice reported that Simon had been several times to the house.

'To see Nan?' Sally asked eagerly.

'Well, it's supposed to be to talk about some virus with Trevor, something that attacks sheep and might be harmful to people. I don't know, because I didn't listen. The point is that Simon comes, and he and Nan seem to have plenty to talk about, and she's quite keen on viruses, if that's their plural.'

'How splendid. Now, Alice, we must arrange a visit to Luthens. I've got to go anyway, because Mr Ford, who's

rather tiresome though awfully sweet, keeps asking me why I don't.'

'It'll be awkward if he turns up while you and Nan are there and treats you and Simon as an engaged couple. I mean, it might put Nan off.'

'I'll take jolly good care to go on a day when he can't come. Let's say next Wednesday. His firm's got a thoroughbred sale on that day and he'll have to be in the office. But isn't it lovely, Alice, that things are turning out all for the best? Thank goodness I didn't let Simon post that letter. He'll live to be truly grateful to me.'

At the moment Simon was not showing any particular signs of gratitude, or even of friendship. He seemed thoroughly cross with Sally, and, although he called several times at the farm in passing, he was not at all like the old, friendly Simon. He seemed to be always on guard, always with a grievance against Sally, and she, who was a happy person and liked everyone around her to be the same, took this to heart. It would be a good thing when he was engaged to Nan and came to realise all Sally had done for him.

But very soon something happened that made her forget even her plans for Simon. On the very day before they were due at Luthens, Sally, who had been working hard cutting thistles and blackberry, came in early and climbed thankfully into a bath. She lay there, reflecting that baths could only be appreciated by weary people, and that she would hurry dinner and go early to bed. She was dressing when she heard a knock at the front door and Tip, their one faithful dog, began to bark ferociously. Then it wasn't Simon; Tip never barked at him. It must be Hugh. Sally ran a comb hurriedly through her damp, curly hair, and wished that she had not got it wet so that it was standing on end and making her look about fifteen. She was sure Hugh preferred sophisticated girls. Then she hurried to the door.

At the gate stood a motor-cycle. On the verandah was a stranger, and beside him a large kit-bag. He was a short, thick-set young man, with an open face, very blue eyes, and a skin that was obviously usually tanned but which now had

a slight pallor, as if from recent illness. He smiled at her in a friendly way, and asked, 'Is this Mrs Leigh's house?'

'Yes. At least it's my house.'

'But isn't your mother at home?'

'I haven't a mother. She died when I was little.'

He looked apologetic. 'Then I reckon I've come to the wrong place. Are there any other Leighs about here?'

'I don't think so. Do you think you've got the right address?'

'Yes, it's the place in her letter all right,' and he began searching in his wallet, talking all the time. 'But this can't be the right place, because the lady I'm looking for is old. She said so in her letters—said she'd take the place of my granny—so it can't be you, can it?'

He laughed pleasantly, but Sally did not join in. A terrible suspicion had dawned. Take the place of his granny. . . . Was it possible . . . ? With unhappy premonition she felt that it was.

At last the stranger produced a letter. It was in Sally's writing. He said slowly, 'Yes, this is the place all right, but where's Sara Leigh?'

With a sinking heart, Sally replied, 'I'm Sara Leigh, at least, I'm Sally. And you . . . you are . . . ?'

Very simply the man replied, 'I'm your lonely sailor, and I've come like you said, to stay with you, if it's convenient, while my ship's in port.'

'I'll say I was took aback,' said Archie Brown.

They were sitting very cosily at the kitchen table and Sally had made a pot of strong tea. Archie liked it, he said, so that the spoon would stand up in it and with plenty of sugar.

She did not say that she had been equally taken aback, only remarking mildly that she had never expected to meet him, because she understood that his ship plied only to America. That, he explained, did not mean a life sentence. He had changed ships and his present one brought freight regularly to New Zealand ports. Sally felt a little faint when she heard this. Regularly. . . . Did he always, she asked, get a month off while his ship was at the various ports?

He explained to her relief that this was special leave, because he had been seized with sudden appendicitis when the ship berthed. He had been taken to hospital and operated on, kept there 'kicking my heels and me perfectly fit' for ten days, and then given leave. 'The appendix? That weren't anything, but I got sick of hospital—and here I am,' he finished, and beamed widely at her.

Here he was, apparently, for a month. Sally smiled heroically and, she hoped, with warm welcome, but some misgiving seemed to strike the lonely sailor. He looked round and then asked, 'But what about you? You don't live here alone, do you?'

She explained that Matthew looked after her and the farm, and secretly wondered with foreboding what Matthew would say when he came in. He had always grumbled about those letters which she wrote so faithfully, and she remembered his

remonstrances now when it was too late. 'Lonely sailor, my foot, with a girl in every port, and you dog-tired and wasting all that money on air mail stamps when he likely doesn't bother to read the letters.'

'Oh, but he does. He answers everything I say. He may have a girl in every port but he says he hasn't got a mother, and his granny died lately. He misses his granny very much, and I'm taking her place,' she had answered smugly.

And here was her adopted grandson.

Archie Brown laughed about that now. 'I was thinkin' about an old lady with white curls. Made up my mind to be a real son to you, and do all the little odd jobs that an old lady on a farm might want done. Reckon I made a bit of a bloomer.'

He looked self-conscious and Sally was sympathetic at once. After all, he was still a lonely sailor and knew no one in this country. If he had made a mistake, it was all her fault. It always was. But she must make him very welcome to atone for her deception. Deception. Here she was again. It seemed as if she, who loved honesty and frankness, was becoming a mass of deception, what Simon had nastily called 'a happy liar'.

She said very kindly, 'Oh, but it's very nice to see you, and I hope you'll stay with us. Of course there are masses of things you could help with, because Matt is so busy that I don't like troubling him with little jobs.'

Archie cheered up at this. 'Then, it's okay with you? That's fine. I like the look of this place, and I'll see I work my passage while I'm here.'

Sally found herself wondering wildly what she could give him to do. Matthew would not welcome interference in his domain, and she could hardly expect Archie to spend his shore leave washing dishes and cooking. Cooking. . . . That was rather an uncomfortable thought, for, judging by the rapidity with which the sailor was disposing of the cakes left over from the party, his appetite was in keeping with his large frame. She kept house on a narrow margin now. How could she stretch it to provide what a robust but lonely sailor



required? 'Oh dear,' thought Sally, 'I'm in another mess, and I only did it for the best, just to cheer him up.'

Archie Brown was no more like her picture of a lonely sailor than she was like his idea of a motherly old lady. He was neither wistful nor thin. If his appendix had been a bad one, there was no sign of delicacy now. He was quick in his movements and his laugh was frequent and hearty. A cheerful person to have in the house, certainly, but she did hope he wouldn't stay the whole month.

As if in answer to her thought, he said amiably, 'The chaps teased me when I said I was going into the country to find the old lady who'd written to me so regularly. They said, "You won't last in the country, Arch. Too quiet for a sailor on leave."

'But my granny lived on a farm and I used to stay a lot with her when I was a kid. So I bought the bike second-hand and came off. Your letters made me think of Granny, sort of kind and old-world,' and then they both burst out laughing.

They were the best of friends in no time, and Sally was even trying unsuccessfully to call him 'Arch', as the sailor had requested. The kit-bag had been firmly deposited in the smaller spare room and he was making up the bed for himself when Matthew came back. Sally was out feeding the fowls and the old man stood staring with his mouth open. Archie had not noticed his arrival and went on smoothing the blankets, whistling gaily from the side of his mouth as he did so, when a thunderous voice demanded, 'Who the hell are you, and what do you think you're doin'?''

Fortunately Sally came in in time to hear the indignant question, and the explanation that followed had at least the effect of silencing the old man. In the privacy of the woodshed, Matt told her that no-one was to blame but herself, as usual.

'Can't think what's come over you, I can't. First you goes and says you're engaged to a chap that doesn't want you, and scares off one that might, and then you lands us with a bloke we've never seen before, who says he's your lonely

sailor. I told you no good would come of them letters, didn't I?'

'I expect so,' was the goaded reply, 'but then you never think any good will come of anything I do. Oh, do stop scolding, Matt. How was I to guess that Archie would turn up here? I thought his ship was safely on the other side of the world.'

'Nothing's safe when you come into it,' said the old man unjustly. 'Only got to put your finger in any pie, and it goes wrong. An' what's he going to do with himself this month? Spend the time roarin' up and down the road on that motor-bike, and getting drunk at the pub, I'll bet.'

'I'm sure he's not that sort,' said Sally stoutly. 'He wouldn't have come to the country if he was like that. He'd have stayed in town and got drunk there.'

'If he could afford it,' said Matthew darkly. 'Them sailors never have any money. They waste it on the first girl they meet when they land. What he wants is a nice cheap holiday, an' you an' me is going to pay for it.'

'I don't believe it. He said he was going to do all sorts of things while he's here. He could be such a help to you, Matt, and do lots of jobs that I'm not strong enough for.'

'Such as . . . ?' asked Matthew with deep sarcasm, and, when Sally murmured something about fencing and stock work, he said coldly, 'Can you see that bloke putting in a strainer so that it stays in, or dagging a sheep without cutting its backside? You ought to have more sense. You ought to know that farming's got to be learnt, like anything else. No, that bloke's no good to me, and you can tell him so.'

'Then he'll just have to fill in his time doing little jobs for me, slapping on paint where things are very shabby, and tidying up the garden. Sailors are awfully good at painting, because they have to do it all the time, and it'll all help to sell the farm,' said Sally optimistically, and she disregarded Matthew's sour enquiry as to who was to pay for the paint Archie slapped on.

In spite of Matthew's attitude, Sally felt that Archie Brown would on the whole be an acquisition, for he was a cheerful,

good-natured young man, and seemed either not to notice Matthew's surliness, or to ignore it. However, the atmosphere began to thaw and Matthew to be almost agreeable when the sailor unpacked his kit and produced a parcel which he bashfully presented to Sally. 'It was meant for my old lady,' he said, grinning, 'But perhaps you can use it too.'

'Use it!' cried Sally, gazing with rapture on a lovely glittering stole which Archie admitted to having bought in the East and smuggled ashore while customs officers were looking for transistors and cigarettes. 'Why, I'll simply adore it.'

Cheered by this, Archie said awkwardly, 'Then there's this, so long as you won't be offended like,' and, to Sally's amazement, handed her a large and unattractively bloody parcel which turned out to be an enormous roast of beef.

'Sort of thought you might like a bit of beef,' he said apologetically. 'My old granny used to say there's nothing like a good juicy roast of beef on a farm where you don't see it often, leastways in England.'

'Your granny was perfectly right, and that goes for New Zealand too, because we all live on mutton. We take it in turn with our neighbours and go the rounds, a shoulder this week, a leg next week, chops in between, and Irish stew all the time.'

'That'll do me fine,' said the sailor. 'We don't see much mutton in my kind of life. . . . But I felt a bit scared about that bit of beef, thought my old lady might be haughty, because her letters are educated-like. Thought she might think I was taking liberties.'

'Well, this old lady isn't a bit haughty and we'll enjoy your present very much,' said Sally gaily, and even Matthew was mollified. It looked, as he said to Sally later, as if the chap wasn't such a cadger after all.

On his part, Archie Brown went to bed in a very happy mood. In spite of his hearty manner, he had felt some misgivings about turning up at a strange house, and these had been increased when he was met by a girl instead of a motherly old lady. But the girl was a bit of all right, kind and jolly and no nonsense; the old chap had looked a bit sour at

first, but he'd come round after that beef, and Archie thanked his stars that he had taken the risk of buying it, telling himself as he did so that he could always throw it away if his hostess seemed the grand sort. But there was nothing grand about this place; it was a bit shabby and very homely, and, if he wasn't mistaken, there wasn't much money about. The girl talked of selling the farm and he must see that he wasn't an expense during his stay. They'd let him buy things and help about the place and keep himself busy.

Sally went to bed feeling slightly dazed. She hung her lovely stole over a chair so that, if she woke in the night, she would be convinced that she had not been merely dreaming. It seemed quite incredible that the unknown to whom she had been so mistakenly writing for years, was now sleeping in the next room. It was all rather difficult. Life had been complicated enough before with this engagement to Simon on her hands, and now she had to explain to her friends that her lonely sailor had materialised and was proposing to stay a month at the farm. Suddenly the thought of Hugh Davenport's face when he heard the news was too much for her, and she began to laugh quite helplessly and foolishly, her head under the bedclothes in case poor Archie Brown suspected that she was laughing at him, or imagined himself in a strange house with a lunatic.

She woke early, remembering that she had promised to go with Alice and her guest to Luthens that day, saw the stole, remembered the man in the next room, and sat up in dismay. A month. . . . What was she going to do with Archie Brown for a month, and, in spite of his obvious generosity, how was she going to stretch her housekeeping allowance to cater for an appetite like that? For a few minutes Sally felt almost overwhelmed by the blow fate had dealt her.

But she was never depressed for long. She jumped out of bed and said to herself, 'He's nice and kind and helpful. Besides, he's lonely. It's mean to wish he wasn't here. Of course it may be a little difficult to explain to Hugh and Simon, but Alice will understand, and what does it matter?'

With which familiar slogan Sally put all her worries from

her and proceeded to get breakfast for a grim Matthew and a hungry Archie.

It had been arranged that the girls would go to Luthens for lunch, and Alice arrived with Nan in time for morning coffee. Archie had been as good as his word and had gone out and attacked the garden as soon as the breakfast dishes were washed. That he knew nothing of flowers and confused them all with weeds was a pity, but at least he was making a clean sweep and everything would look very tidy by the time he had finished.

Sally was glad that he was out of the house when the girls arrived, for there was some explaining to do. Alice, who had naturally been surprised to see a stranger working so enthusiastically in the garden, said, 'Sally, have you found someone to do the garden for you? How marvellous.'

'Well, it's not exactly like that. Alice, do you remember Trevor saying one day that my chickens would come home to roost? Well, one of them has. That man's my lonely sailor.'

'Sally, what on earth are you talking about? Now, don't start laughing like that. Nan, don't be alarmed. Sally always goes into fits of laughter when something awkward has happened. . . . Your lonely sailor? Surely not?'

'Yes,' said Sally, suddenly serious. 'Yes, there he is. That's his motor-cycle in the shed, and his kit-bag is in that room. He's come for a month.'

'But I thought his ship never came to New Zealand?'

'So did I. That's one thing I've found out, Alice. Never write to a lonely sailor because you think you won't meet him. It isn't safe. They change ships. Archie Brown has changed his, and he's had his appendix out and got shore leave, and here he is.'

Alice looked dismayed. She knew quite well that Sally could not afford to support an extra man for a month. She said faintly, 'Archie Brown. . . . Is that his name?'

'Yes, but you can call him Arch if you like,' said Sally, and laughed again. 'But really he's awfully nice and he brought me a lovely stole. It was meant for his old lady, but it just



shows how little he knows, because it wouldn't have suited me at all if I'd been an old lady. And a big roast of beef, because his granny used to like beef and he thought I'd be like her.'

Nan Reading was feeling stunned. She had thought Sally a nice little girl, if rather uninteresting. Now she was positively raving. But Alice seemed to understand what she meant and said calmly, 'Well, that's all to the good. . . . Let me see the stole. Yes, it's beautiful. What a mercy it wasn't a cashmere shawl. It'll go beautifully with that dress we made. And beef too. He sounds a sensible sort of man, but you do know, don't you, that he's throwing all the plants over the fence?'

'Yes, but I couldn't hurt his feelings by saying so. Anyway, what does it matter? He'll make it look awfully tidy and I won't be here long enough to miss the flowers. At least, I hope not.'

'Is there really a prospect of a buyer?' Alice asked, for she was worried about her friend and knew that something would have to happen soon to solve her problems.

'Well, there's always a hope. Mr Ford's sent several people out. Anyway, it won't be for another month, so Archie will have his holiday.'

'Really, Sally, what does it matter about Archie Brown? It's you and Matt that matter.'

'Yes, I suppose so, but all the same it would have been a pity if he'd had to go sadly away when he found the farm had been sold. He would never have found his old lady, and that would have been so disappointing,' said Sally, with her usual complete lack of logic and common sense.

It was all quite beyond Nan Reading who obviously thought her hostess slightly unhinged. But Nan's manners were always impeccable and she was most gracious to Archie when Sally summoned him in from the garden, and insisted on his drinking coffee with them in the sitting-room.

'But I'm pretty mucky from the garden,' he protested, and Sally assured him that on a farm no one thought anything of a little honest dirt. This rather daunted Nan, who decided that she did not particularly care for this sort of farm, where there

were obviously no class distinctions and the owner was matey with everybody. She was a little more disconcerted when presently they were joined by the queer old man who had hovered about on the night of that party, and whom Sally referred to as her mentor and guardian. Altogether there was a marked absence of the feudal spirit on this farm, and Nan could only hope that the atmosphere of Luthens would be more normal and congenial. If not, there might be a good deal to be said for London life and a prosperous stockbroker.

In spite of the slight disillusionment she had felt on Sally's farm, Nan set out for Luthens with pleasant anticipation. With all her affectations, she had a genuine liking for country life, and Simon was an interesting man and quite good-looking enough. She had read a great deal about the spacious graciousness of life on New Zealand's old sheep stations and hoped she would find it at Luthens.

Her first impressions were favourable. She liked Mrs Forster and appreciated her. Here she would be able to judge for herself, find out if what she had read and heard was true, and particularly find out whether it appealed to her. She thought it would, that it would be preferable to city life with an adoring but unglamorous business man.

The manager's house was a little disappointing. Dull, she decided, but of course that could be remedied. Simon at least was not dull. Soon after they arrived he came riding down the paddock, and she thought how well he looked on his useful station hack, dismounting so easily, dropping the reins with an air of assurance, evidently confident that the horse would not move away. It would obey him, and doubtless the many station hands would do the same.

He greeted her with a pleasant warmth, different from his careful politeness to Alice and his gruff embarrassed welcome to Sally. Nan found herself wondering why these two seemed so constrained in each other's company. Alice said that they were old friends, but there was not much sign of friendship between them now.

Mrs Forster said that lunch would not be ready for an hour.

'So perhaps, Simon, if you could spare the time . . . ? A little tour, perhaps . . . ? Miss Reading is so interested.'

Simon said that he had arranged his work so that this hour was free, and smiled gallantly upon the English girl. This was Simon in a new light, and Sally found that she did not appreciate it. She said, 'Well, I think I'll stay with you, Aunt Dorothy. I've seen plenty of wool-sheds, and they bore me.'

Nan looked shocked. 'Oh, I think it'll be thrilling. They're working, aren't they? We could see masses of sheep in the distance as we came in.'

Simon said the men were crutching, and, closely questioned by Nan, and crossly aware of Sally's amused expression, floundered a little in trying to explain to her the process and purpose of crutching. Then he turned abruptly to Sally. 'You'd better come too. After all, you're supposed to be interested,' a remark that made Nan turn questioning eyes on the girl.

'He means that I'm supposed to be a dedicated farmer,' Sally explained airily, and Aunt Dorothy relieved the puzzled tension by saying that it was extraordinary how many people were supposed to be dedicated nowadays. 'It used to be only the clergy and sometimes not all of them,' and, under cover of the diversion, Sally said crossly that, if everybody was going to make a thing of it, she supposed she'd better go, and Simon, having shrugged unpleasantly, followed them out of the house,

The wool-shed was some distance from the manager's house and the way led through an avenue of tall old poplars with only a few golden leaves hanging from their branches. Simon said that another frost or two would show them that the autumn was really here, and Nan paused and gazed at them in ecstasy at the brilliantly blue sky.

'Autumn,' she murmured and added softly, 'Season of mist and mellow fruitfulness.'

Everybody halted and Sally tactlessly said, 'I beg your pardon?' while Alice looked embarrassed. She had warned Nan about too much poetry, but evidently she had not put it strongly enough, for the girl remained gazing upward at the

poplar boughs and then, in low and thrilling notes, recited the whole ode while the others stood awkwardly by, Simon betraying his uneasiness by moving impatiently from one foot to the other.

When she had finished Sally said, 'I remember having to learn that in detention, and I said, "Your skirt soft lifted" and the teacher thought I was being cheeky.'

The words were so commonplace that Simon drew a breath of relief. He did not like a rarefied atmosphere and had a secret conviction that poetry should only be recited in the bathroom, with both taps running. He said awkwardly, 'Well, I suppose we'd better be getting along, if you want to see the men at work. They knock off at twelve,' and for the first time it occurred to Nan that a New Zealand sheep-farmer might be no more glamorous or poetical than a city stockbroker.

The wool-shed was hot and dusty. The pens were full and the smell of wool, dags, and sweat was overpowering. The six shearers hardly glanced up from their work when the manager and his guests came in, and even Nan could see very little poetry in their work. The visitors stood watching in silence for some minutes, and then Sally said, 'See what I mean? Dirty and smelly and boring,' and was startled when Nan replied with a sudden volley of loud sneezes.

They all glanced at her in surprise, for the sneezes were not ladylike, inhibited affairs, but spluttering and strident. The attack lasted for several seconds and left the girl's pretty face flushed.

'Oh dear, I wonder if you're catching cold, Nan,' Alice murmured inadequately.

This was resented. 'Of course not. I never catch cold. It's—it's just a tickle.'

'Perhaps the dust's worrying you', said Simon, and they moved away from the stands and over to the press. Here Nan struggled to show an appropriate interest, but she was seized by another prolonged bout of sneezing. Sally looked at her in alarm. She'd heard of people with an allergy to the smell of wool; surely, oh surely this couldn't be a case of that? What horrible luck. . . .

She said, 'Simon, let's get out of here. It stinks to high Heaven. I can never see what people find attractive about sheep. Cows are supposed to smell, but sheep beat them.'

Simon looked affronted. No sheep-man likes this sort of remark. Cows are creatures on a lower plane and it was ridiculous of Sally to talk like this. He ignored her and said pointedly, 'Let's get out into the open, then, if Sally's too refined for a wool-shed. I've got some stud rams in this year over here, Nan, and, if you're interested in the fine points of a sheep, we'll have a close look at them.'

Sally followed humbly. This was better. In the fresh air Nan was not likely to be troubled by her allergy, if allergy it was. The yard with the stud Romneys was not near the wool-shed. The visitor would be able to wax enthusiastic again, and even quote poetry if she wanted to.

Simon was an enthusiast, and, like most enthusiasts, unaware of the reactions of his audience. He began to point out the peculiar excellence of these rams and even caught one to show the girls its finer points. Nan bent over to admire them, and then it happened again. Without warning a shattering volley of sneezes burst out. She turned away and tried to smother them, but this time the attack was more relentless and, when at last she turned round, the others were appalled to see that her lovely skin was a mass of ugly blotches. They gazed at her in silence for a moment and then Sally said, 'Well, that's enough about your old rams, Simon. Let's go and get some lunch. I'm sick of sheep anyway.'

This time Nan did not protest. She followed rather slowly, stopping every now and then to sneeze violently, and, after each spasm, the rash on her face stood out more clearly. What, Sally wondered sadly, was she going to say when she looked in the glass?

After one stricken glance she said little, and everyone admired her composure. But she did not suggest looking at any of the broad acres she had been so poetical about, indeed, her one anxiety seemed to be to get away from Luthens and so from Simon. Sally saw with despair an expression almost of dislike when she glanced in his direction.



Aunt Dorothy tut-tutted and said sadly that sheep affected some people like that, and began a long story about a girl who had been engaged to a sheep farmer and been so prostrated by her allergy that she had married a clergyman instead. 'And luckily one with a city parish,' she finished triumphantly.

When for one minute Sally was alone with Alice, she murmured. 'All up the spout, isn't it? Oh Alice, couldn't it be something else that upset her?'

Alice shook her head. 'We'll see what Trevor says, but I'm afraid . . .'

That evening Sally knew the worst. Alice rang to say that it was an allergy all right, and Trevor said it evidently had to do with the wool of a sheep. He had met it before, and the trouble came whenever the victim went too near a sheep. 'And so you see . . .'

Alice finished. Sally exploded. 'What hellish luck, and it was going so well, too.'

'Well, I'm afraid it's Nan who's going now. She spoke of flying in a few days, and,' here Alice dropped her voice, 'and she's written by air to that stockbroker.'

Sally gave what she imagined to be a hollow groan and with a gesture replaced the receiver.

It had taken Archie only a day to give what he called 'a new look' to the garden. On her return from the unfortunate visit to Luthens Sally gazed at the result with some dismay; it was certainly a new look and a bare one. Archie had spared a few straggling chrysanthemums, already showing the effect of the autumn cold, and had sternly staked these into symmetrical pyramids. Most of the rest was barren soil.

'Oh well,' Sally said privately to Matthew, 'no one can say it isn't tidy, and, if we haven't sold the farm by the spring, I can start again. You're not to say a word to Archie. He's done his best and it's perfectly sweet of him.'

The trouble was that the lonely sailor was already looking for fresh worlds to conquer. Matthew, who had now grown completely resigned to his presence, said that at least there was nothing lazy about him. His whole ambition was 'to lend a hand' and 'to work his passage'. At breakfast on the second morning he said brightly, 'Tell you what—there's plenty of odd bits of timber here and there, what about me running you up a bit of a gazzy-bo?'

Sally exchanged a startled glance with Matthew. 'A—a what?'

'What they calls a gazzy-bo. Sort of summer-house. Down there in the corner of the garden.'

Sally hesitated. She could not feel that Archie would prove a first-class carpenter. She said faintly, 'How nice of you to think of it, Archie, but wouldn't it be rather a waste? I mean—you know we're trying to sell the farm, and then someone else would have your—your gazebo.'

'But you haven't sold the farm yet,' the sailor reminded

her, and Sally sadly agreed that that was only too true. Aware of having been tactless, Archie said quickly, 'But of course you'll sell it all right, and a nice little gazzy-bo's just the thing to make it go. Ladies like the look of them. Can't see why myself, what with draughts, and spiders down your neck, but there you are. They like them, and it'll give the place a bit of a lift.'

Sally was sadly conscious that the old house could do with one, but would it really gain by Archie's handiwork? Matthew was stubbornly opposed to the idea.

'Wastin' good nails on a contraption like that, and when it's done it'll like as not come tumbling down in the first gale.'

Archie, who was learning how to get on with Matthew, laughed good-humouredly at the criticism but stuck to his idea. Sally said feebly, 'But why should you work all your holiday? Why not go for a ride on your motor-cycle and see something of the country?'

Archie agreed that he might do a bit of sight-seeing, but there was time for that and the gazzy-bo too. 'If only he wouldn't call it that,' Sally lamented when Alice rang her up. 'Somehow it sounds so sinister; I can't think why.'

'Because ages ago we went to a film called that and the gazebo had a dead body in it.'

'Oh, of course that's it. What a comfort you are, Alice. Well, we won't have any bodies in ours and Archie's so kind and helpful and I'm sure he means it for the best.'

When Alice reported this to her husband, Dr Moore said that two people doing things for the best would be more than poor old Matthew could be expected to stand. Alice protested at this. 'Aren't you being a little bit cross with Sally, dear? I know it's upsetting about poor Nan's allergy, but it wasn't Sally's fault.'

'I suppose not, but you must admit that the girl has one crazy scheme after another and they always blow up.'

'I don't think that's fair. You know you quite agreed that Nan and Simon were attracted to each other, and it would have been splendid, but for those wretched sheep.'

'Well, as wretched sheep are Simon's livelihood, it's just as well they found out in time. That's quite a nasty rash. No wonder the girl doesn't want to go out.'

Nor did Nan particularly want to talk to Simon when he telephoned his enquiries. She was brief and a little cool when she spoke to him, and, later in the day, when he happened to be passing Sally's house, he looked in to tell her of his grievance.

'You'd think it was my doing,' he grumbled, forgetting his quarrel with her and expecting her usual sympathy. But Sally was feeling disgruntled too. It had been such a splendid plan and now it was completely shattered. Unwisely, Simon went on, 'Girls are damned queer. No depending on them. She seemed so friendly, but, when I telephoned, she was pretty short. . . . I suppose you haven't been up to any tricks, Sally? Not told her about this damned fool engagement?'

This was too much, and Sally lost her temper. 'Of course I didn't tell her. Do you think I want to boast about it? Anyway, it's the last thing I'd tell Nan Reading when I was trying so hard to . . . to . . .'

She paused, but a moment too late. Simon was a quick thinker and now he remembered that first pressing invitation to Sally's party, her eagerness to take the girl to Luthens, Alice's proffered hospitality. It was the last straw. These blasted girls had been plotting together, trying to settle his life for him. 'Trying so hard to what? Now, Sally, come clean. What were you trying to do?'

She knew that tone and remembered that once it had power to alarm her. But she was fifteen then. She said, as coldly as he, 'Trying to find someone who'd marry a man with a nasty temper, who's always finding fault and being ungrateful.'

'I thought so. So it was a plot. You thought you'd wriggle out of this fool engagement by forcing another girl on me. . . .'

'Forcing her? Of all the conceited things to say. . . . You know perfectly well that you found her attractive, more attractive than she found you. Why, she burst out in a rash

at sight—well, perhaps not of you, but of your silly sheep that you love.’

They glared at each other for a moment and then the unexpected happened, as it used to happen so often between these two. Simon suddenly burst out laughing and in a minute Sally had joined him. He said presently, ‘You’ve got a nerve. Burst into a rash at sight of . . . Sally, you do go in for home truths, don’t you?’

The quarrel was over, as it had always been in the old days. Sally said, ‘Dear Simon, don’t be cross. I just want you to have the nicest girl in the world, and Nan was nice till she started sneezing.’

‘Of course she’s nice, but you didn’t really think she’d look at me?’

Sally was indignant at once. ‘And why not? I’m sure she would have, if it hadn’t been for that wretched rash. Sneezing wasn’t so bad, but no girl would marry a man if . . . if . . .’

‘If the sight of him brought her out in a rash? I’m sure she couldn’t, and I’m sure I couldn’t either, so no damage was done. But for Pete’s sake, girl, stop managing my life for me. It doesn’t work.’

‘But Simon, it’s my duty. I started all this and I’ve got to see it through.’

He laughed again. ‘I’m dead scared when you get that soulful look in your eyes. You’d have made a hell of a good missionary. . . . By the way, talking of good works, what’s your lonely sailor up to in that corner of the garden?’

‘He calls it a gazy-bo, and it may turn into some sort of summer-house. Isn’t it queer?’

‘Queer all right. It’s all lop-sided. Why not get him to make a fowl-house instead?’

‘Oh no. He’s most ambitious and says this’ll help to sell the farm.’

Her voice changed, as always at mention of selling, and he glanced at her quickly.

‘Must you sell? You love it, don’t you?’

‘Yes, but it’s hopeless. We seem to get further back every year. Oh, don’t let’s talk about it, Simon. Something will



turn up. Some buyer, I mean. . . . By the way, if you're going past the village, will you give me a lift? I want some library books and I don't like using the car for such a short distance.'

'Of course, but I didn't know the village boasted a library.'

The village was a small place, a collection of shops, two garages, a post office, and an hotel, and had the ambitious name of Queensville. Sally said, 'Yes, it hasn't been going long. A nice girl runs it. Her name's Judith West and she lives in the four rooms behind the library. I like her.'

She told him more about it as they drove, but Simon hardly listened. He was thinking of her words, 'We seem to get further back every year.' He was worried about her. She had plenty of spirit and Alice had told him of the fight she had put up to keep the farm. Evidently it had beaten her. He wished he could help, and wild ideas of putting his limited capital into buying the mortgage flashed through his mind. He wouldn't want any interest. . . . But he knew it would be no use. Sally wasn't the kind of person to whom you could offer that sort of help.

The village was not a picturesque spot and the cottage which Judith West had lately bought for a library was small. But she seemed to have collected some good books, and, while Sally chatted to the girl behind the counter, Simon wandered round the shelves. Presently she called to him. 'Simon, come and meet our librarian. Judith, this is Simon Hunter, who manages Luthens, and Simon you certainly ought to join. The more subscribers, the more books, and we all want the library to go.'

Simon agreed readily enough. He liked the books and he liked the look of the girl behind the counter. She had very blue eyes and a little air of dignity and reserve. He chose a couple of books and left to drive Sally home. They talked happily, and she thought that the old Simon was coming back again, the Simon she had not seen since that unfortunate encounter with Samuel Ford in the tea-room. This made her happy because, although she met his criticism hardily enough, Sally did not like this old friend to disapprove of her.

He consented to come in for a cup of tea and presently

reverted to the subject of Archie Brown. 'Where is he now? Doesn't spend all his time messing round that summer-house, does he?'

'I persuaded him to go for a ride on his motor-cycle. He's supposed to be on holiday. I want him to amuse himself.'

Simon looked thoughtful. 'Depends on what his amusements are. You don't want to have him on your hands if he gets tight. Do you know anything about him, Sally?'

She laughed. 'Only that he's a lonely sailor. Oh, don't croak, Simon. I had enough of that from Matt at first, but he likes him now. Archie's all right. Who minds if he has a drink or two? I can look after myself.'

Simon doubted this but he did not say so. He knew the effect of such comments on Sally. She went on, 'And he's not the sort to get drunk. I can tell that, and I'm a very good judge of character. Here he comes now.'

Simon looked at the man who entered and was relieved. Archie had certainly had a drink or two but he was not at all intoxicated. He was beaming with good nature as he unpacked what he called 'a few bits for the larder'. They were substantial bits and Simon marvelled that Sally, who was so touchy about presents, accepted them happily. Later she said, 'He loves getting things and he's not short of money. He was quite frank about it, said he couldn't do what he called "sawning" on us. He could only stay if we let him buy a bag of bananas or a pound of sausages when he went to town. Of course it's a lot more than bananas or sausages, but it keeps him happy and makes Matt far better tempered too.'

'And you?'

Sally flushed. 'Oh, it's silly to be proud with Archie. As a matter of fact, it wouldn't be fair to have him here unless we let him contribute something. Matt hasn't had wages for a long time, only his tobacco. He's got his pension, of course, but I couldn't expect him to help pay for Archie's keep, just because I started writing to a lonely sailor, could I?' And she managed to laugh quite brightly.

But Simon felt unhappy. He had known Sally since she

was five and in, some obscure way, felt responsible for her. Then he reflected that there were others who probably felt this even more, and with more right. Presently he asked, 'And what does Davenport think about your selling? He's your lawyer, isn't he?'

Sally's chin went up in a little defiant gesture. She said, 'I didn't ask him. Why should I? He's just my lawyer, not my guardian. Anyway, I'm sure he thinks it's the only thing to do. He'd have said so if he'd thought there was any way out,' and her voice trembled as she remembered how much she had hoped that Hugh might perhaps suggest some alternative, might find some obliging client who wanted to buy a rather shaky mortgage, that he would help somehow to solve her problems. But, although he had been meticulous in seeing to her business, he had made no constructive suggestions but had merely said, 'Yes, you would be wise to get out if you can,' and left it at that.

The memory of all this made her say haughtily, 'He happens to be my lawyer because Father took his business to his partner, Mr Lawrence, and Mr Lawrence handed me over to him. . . . Just a paid lawyer, you know,' and laughed suddenly to think how the magnificent Hugh would react to that remark. Then she looked worried as the thought came, 'At least, I hope I can pay him.'

Simon, who was watching her expressive face, guessed pretty well what she was thinking and sighed. How much simpler life would be if you could say to a girl—a girl you quarrelled with and sometimes thought quite impossible, but who was still Sally—'Look here, I've got money in the bank, waiting till I can find a farm and have earned a bit more. Why not let me buy the mortgage and put things right?'

But, though he could be extremely abusive and unpleasant to Sally, he knew that he would never dare to say those words. Instead he changed the subject.

'I'm glad you took me to that little library. That's a nice girl and she's got some good books. I wonder what made her start a library in Queensville, of all places.'

'I suppose because there's no library for nearly thirty

miles and she got this cottage cheaply. But what made her start at all was because she had an awful lot of books. Her father seems to have been slightly mad about collecting them, and Judith had just decided to send them all to be sold when she had word that an uncle had died and left her what's called "his personal estate", and that was mostly lots more books. So suddenly she got the idea of putting what money she had into buying popular books and setting up in Queensville, and I think she'll do quite well because there are lots of people near who don't want to go to town every time they want a book. Simon, you must get all the Luthens men to join. It'd make a difference, and I like Judith.'

'I'll give it a go. I expect Ian Fraser will join because he reads a lot.'

'Who's Ian Fraser?'

'Didn't you meet him? He's been shepherding at Luthens for the last year. Good-looking chap. His father's got a big place up north. I can't quite make out what Ian's doing here, but I rather think he and the old man don't hit it off. Anyway, he's a good chap. . . . Well, I must be off,' and he was just going to the door when the telephone rang with an urgent sound.

Sally said, 'Wait a minute. I've got a feeling that this is something important. Perhaps somebody making an offer for the farm. Stay and tell me what to do. You can laugh if you like, but I know it isn't an ordinary ring.'

He shrugged but waited, and so heard Sally say sharply, 'Who? I'm afraid I can't hear. Who is speaking? . . . Could you spell it? Yes, I get that . . . A.L.O.Y.S.,' and then she put out a feeble hand to the wall for support, and showed dreadful signs of collapsing into laughter.

She steadied her voice, however, and went on, 'Not really? Why, I can't believe it. I thought you were safely. . . . I mean, it seems to . . . to . . . too unlikely to be true. Great-Uncle Aloysius. And when did you arrive? By air today? For a holiday?'

Another pause, and more signs of hysterical laughter, and then Sally went on, 'Of course you must come here. . . . I

mean, if that's what you want to do. . . . Fairies in the bush? No, I've never heard the Maoris speak of them. . . . But how fascinating. What was that? . . . Did you say you were sure you would find them? Oh, Uncle Aloysius,' and this time Sally did collapse and handed the receiver silently and urgently to Simon, who muttered, 'Hunter speaking, sir . . . Mr Aloysius Leigh. . . . Yes, I know your name quite well. Yes, I see . . . I'll tell Sally . . . She—she's been called away at the moment' (this with a savage glance at the girl whose face was buried in the sofa cushions). 'You want her to meet you tomorrow morning and bring you out to the farm? . . . Yes, yes, I see. . . . I'll tell her. . . . I expect she could be there by ten o'clock. . . . Goodbye, sir.'

Simon replaced the receiver slowly and stood looking at Sally. She sat up, her face very flushed and her eyes bright. 'Oh Simon, isn't it awful? Did he say—how long?'

'He did not. He spoke of an indefinite holiday. My poor girl, you've certainly put your foot in it this time.'

She was indignant at once. 'What a thing to say! Poor old man, he must be over seventy, and he's every right to come and see his great-niece if he feels like it. I'm surprised at your speaking like that. Of course I'll welcome him. I'm sure he'll be a dear old man and lonely. Come to see his only niece.'

'He seems to have come to look for fairies.'

'That too, of course, but I feel that the real reason will be that he longs for his own kith and kin,' said Sally, looking very sentimental.

'He's taken his time over it.'

'Simon, you're getting into the habit of carping at everything. . . . I don't feel like that at all. It was rather a shock at first, of course, but I feel sure he'll be sweet. . . . A little, round man, with fluffy white hair, the sort you see in children's books sitting on toad-stools.'

'My dear girl, you're raving. This has certainly unhinged you.'

She went on, 'And he'll be an immense comfort to me, because after all he's almost my only relation and relations do understand.'



'And what about Matt? Will he understand?'

'Now, don't start that. It'll be time enough to meet that when it comes. Oh Simon, he's really a little mad about fairies. He asked if there was any forest near here, because that was where he'd find them. He called them "the little people".'

'Sounded complete nuts to me. And how will you manage with three men?'

She thought he meant from a financial point of view and was up in arms at once. 'Of course I can manage. We're not on the dole, though I often wish I was sixty-five and could collect lovely money every month just for being old. . . . Anyway, Uncle Aloysius won't be a burden. He probably hardly eats anything.'

'Why do you think that?' asked Simon with irritating literalness.

'Oh well, a hearty appetite doesn't somehow go with fairies,' said Sally vaguely.

'But isn't it a mercy that I've got two spare rooms? I can't imagine Uncle Aloysius sharing with Archie, particularly when Archie has had a few drinks. They might start seeing fairies all over the place, and that would be so trying.'

Simon went away then, but as he drove home he thought, 'She's got lots of pluck, even if she does do mad things. . . . But what next?'

This was very much what Aunt Dorothy said when he told her of the latest crisis in Sally's life. She sighed and said, 'Poor little girl. Everything seems to come to her. It's very unfair.'

'But you must admit she brings things on herself.'

Aunt Dorothy for once looked cross with her beloved nephew. 'If you mean that she was wrong to write letters to a poor lonely old man, Simon, I think that you are showing a lack of family feeling. No one could foresee that the old gentleman would fly over here looking for fairies, and I'm sure he won't find any here,' she finished, looking vaguely round the room.

'Well, I suppose it's bad luck, but Sally does seem to do

such rash things and then life gets so damned complicated.'

'Yes, dear, I can understand how you feel, because of course it's a little difficult for you to keep up this pretended engagement. Awkward as time goes on and they begin to ask you when it's coming off and how long do you want for the honeymoon,' and the old lady proceeded placidly with her crochet.

Simon stared at her. 'Do you mean to say that you knew all along that it was just—just what you call a pretended engagement? Did you guess that Sally had told Mr Ford about it on the spur of the moment, to keep me from resigning?'

'Of course, dear. Mr Ford told me all about meeting you both in the tea-room, and I naturally guessed the rest. Dear Sally's kind heart, of course. . . . As if I wouldn't know better than to think you were really engaged! Such nonsense!'

For some reason, Simon felt slightly irritated. 'Why is it such nonsense? She's attractive, and we've known each other all her life.'

'Yes, dear. Far too long. That's just the point. Brother and sister, perhaps, but nothing more. Besides, your way of treating her. . . . So different from that handsome Mr Davenport's. . . . One could see at a glance,' and, as usual, Aunt Dorothy went off into vague murmurs and Simon could get nothing more out of her, except a remark about the probable length of Uncle Aloysius's visit.

'I do hope the poor child isn't very worried. It's just an additional burden on her. But then, Sally never worries for long.'

In this Mrs Forster was quite right. The dear child was at that moment going to the unnecessary expense of putting in a call to Alice Moore, just to say, 'Do tell Trevor that he was horribly right. The second chicken has come home to roost. Uncle Aloysius is here.'

He was not, Sally decided, after one startled glance, at all like the pictures of rotund little men sitting on toad-stools in a children's story-book; much more like the bad wolf in 'Little Red Riding-hood' Uncle Aloysius was a long, stooping, grey man with a disgruntled expression. Not a heartening sight, she thought, as she went forward in the hotel lobby to greet him. She had pictured a warm embrace, but no one could possibly kiss Uncle Aloysius. It was all rather disillusioning, especially as, when she arrived, the old man was engaged in explaining forcibly to the hotel porter that he didn't believe in tipping. It was, he said, an insult to human dignity. The porter looked sardonic and would, Sally felt uncomfortably, have put up with the insult.

This dissertation over, he turned to his niece and remarked that she was ten minutes late and that he had grown worried. Sally, still quite dazed (for how could this man possibly believe in fairies?), murmured apologies and led him to the car.

At least, she thought as she drove him to the farm, Uncle Aloysius made no pretence of having been urged by family love to visit his niece. He had come, he made it quite clear, for one purpose. The society of which he was, apparently, a distinguished member, had delegated to him the duty of enquiring into reports that the 'natives' of New Zealand had long been aware of the presence of 'the little people' in their forests.

This puzzled Sally even more until she realised that the 'natives' meant the Maoris, and that 'the little people' were not a race of pigmies but another way of describing fairies. Cross-questioned about this, she said very firmly that

she had never heard of such rumours. As for fairies, she hadn't seen any about but she hoped he would have better luck—and then she thought, with a suppressed giggle, that it sounded as if Uncle Aloysius was off on a game-hunting expedition.

It did not take her long to decide that all her dreams of Uncle Aloysius were mistaken. He was not a lovable old man, impelled by a longing to meet his niece, a little mad, perhaps, but only in the most charming and child-like way. Uncle Aloysius was a complete puzzle, but not an attractive one. He appeared to be a rather hard, mean old man, wrapped up in himself and his one obsession—the belief in the supernatural. That seemed to be his only human quality—if you could call it that.

The one thing that cheered her was that he had brought very little luggage. That didn't point to 'an indefinite holiday'. But her hopes were short-lived because presently Aloysius Leigh made it very clear that he meant to stay with his niece until he had tracked down these elusive 'little people'. 'And as there aren't any,' as Sally said later to Archie, 'that means he'll stay with me for ever.'

That was a blow, because imagination quailed when she tried to picture the effect of this old man on Matthew. Both he and Sally had grown accustomed to Archie—who was no burden but a most generous and unselfish guest. Except when he had had what he described as 'one over the eight', he was good company, and even when he returned rather late, with the motor-cycle wobbling uncertainly, he was merely a little talkative and never offensive.

But Uncle Aloysius was quite a different matter, and Sally found herself wondering how this unpleasant old man could possibly be her father's relative. James Leigh had been a charming, kind, slightly reckless and improvident person. One thing Uncle Aloysius was not was either reckless or improvident. He quite obviously meant to make use of his great-niece and give as little return as possible.

When she realised this, Sally felt sufficiently annoyed to say, 'I'm glad you came now, Uncle, because in a few weeks it might have been too late.'

He gave her a nervous glance and moved to the far end of his seat, evidently fearing to discern the seeds of some fatal and probably contagious disease. 'Why too late?' he asked, and there was a quaver of anxiety in his voice. Anxiety, not for Sally, but for himself and his 'little people'. ('Not that fairies catch diseases, but just that he might have to go away without seeing them,' as Sally explained to Matthew later.) She answered briefly. 'Because I'm trying to sell the farm and it might go at any moment. Of course we'd get a fortnight's notice, but that would cut your visit pretty short.' (But not short enough, she thought.)

He showed no interest in her plans but merely said that, once he had definite evidence to prove the existence of 'the little people' in New Zealand, he would hurry home to lay that evidence before the society. Sally did not find this explanation of his plans at all comforting, for where was the silly old man going to find a fairy?

She was thoroughly nervous when she introduced her new-found relative to Matthew. Archie was all right; he would laugh good-naturedly and without resentment, but Matthew did not suffer fools gladly. If only Uncle Aloysius had been at all like her father, Sally thought, Matthew would have welcomed him. As it was, he gave him one searching glance, and went away muttering that 'Families aren't everything. It's the bloke himself that counts.' It was only too clear that the bloke counted not at all with Matthew, for, when Uncle Aloysius was discoursing (in the intervals of devouring an enormous lunch) on the presence of the supernatural all around us, Matthew rose suddenly from the table, pushed his plate aside, and said it 'fair churned him up to hear stories of bloody fairies.'

Afterwards Sally remonstrated with him. 'Do remember he's our guest,' she said.

'And who asked him to be our blasted guest, and how long's he stayin'?' was Matthew's surly reply, and Sally said, with an optimism that she did not feel, 'Oh, not long. Just till he's proved there are fairies here.'



Matthew's expression became more gloomy. 'And if they aren't?'

'Oh well, there's always a hope of selling the farm and he'll have to go then,' said Sally, a little ashamed because she could not feel welcoming to this strange old man.

It had become an uncomfortable household, for Matthew did not hide his antagonism and, next day when Aloysius had gone out to run his fairies to earth, he complained that 'This house is nothing but a loony-bin nowadays, what with you saying you're engaged when you're not, and Archie making a gazzy-bo that'll tumble down if you leans on it, and this old bloke that says he's your uncle and looks for fairies in the bush.'

Sally said, 'Yes, I know it's pretty awful. But it's awful for me too, Matthew.'

This softened him and he said, 'Used to be all right when it was you and me and that bloke Davenport and Simon looking in sometimes. But I'll bet they'll give us a miss nowadays once they see what we've got here. . . . Fairies in the bush! I suppose he thinks they prance up and down the tree ferns and get caught in the lawyers. Chap's mad as a hatter and eats like a horse.'

'Well, do stop grumbling about him. It can't go on for ever. As for Hugh Davenport, he's all right, and Simon's not likely to cut us because of Uncle Aloysius. By the way, Hugh's coming out this evening. Something about the bank overdraft, blast it. It'll be fun to see him coping with Uncle.'

Matthew gave her a disapproving glance and went away muttering that she was bound to come a cropper if she kept on thinking everything was fun, adding something extremely rude about where he would like Aloysius Leigh to put his darned fairies.

Sally sighed. If she wasn't very careful she was going to begin feeling sorry for herself, and that, in her language, was 'bottoms'. She was, however, saved from this horrible fate by suddenly getting a view of the gazebo from the window near which she was standing. It was an extraordinary contraption and might not have cheered everybody up, but it certainly

made Sally laugh. Archie had told her proudly that very morning that the gazzy-bo was 'taking shape,' but the shape was quite extraordinary. As yet, no walls were up, but the so-called uprights were there and showed only too clearly that no two sides of the summer-house were going to correspond. From the beginning Archie had disdained Sally's suggestions of measurements and foot rules, declaring that he preferred to go 'by nature'. The result showed nature at her worst and most freakish. However, Sally thought consolingly, it would be the easiest thing in the world to knock it down; she herself would give it a good push as soon as Archie had rejoined his ship. Meantime, she was doing her best to stave off his painting ambitions. There was something permanent about paint.

Hugh had declined her invitation to dinner and for this she was thankful, for meals had become an ordeal which she would like to have avoided herself. Uncle Aloysius had an appetite in keeping with his lean and hungry look and, as he made no effort either to help or to contribute to the larder, Matthew had begun to note every mouthful with a grudging and malevolent expression. Sally would have hated Hugh to sit there watching all this with his critical and superior air.

She had finished the dishes with Archie's unfailing help when Hugh arrived, carrying a handsome brief-case and looking every inch the successful lawyer. Sally met him at the door and with secret amusement introduced him to Archie and her uncle. Hugh's imperturbable countenance gave nothing away, but, when Aloysius Leigh had cross-questioned him for a few minutes about Maori folk-lore, he suggested mildly that, as he had to talk business, perhaps Sally and he had better sit in the dining-room.

'If it's mortgages and overdrafts, Matt had better come too,' she said, thus thwarting the old man in his evident desire to leave her for a promising tête-à-tête with Hugh. He came grudgingly, and Hugh opened his brief-case on the dining-room table, first firmly closing the door.

He said, 'What a strange household. . . . Sally, you do seem

to collect extraordinary people. Is that sailor fellow going to stay indefinitely?’

‘Oh no, unfortunately,’ said Sally with a slight giggle. ‘It’s Uncle Aloysius who’s having an indefinite holiday. At least it depends on the fairies. . . . Archie’s only got three weeks to go and we’ll miss him. He’s very helpful. But I’m afraid Uncle Aloysius won’t go till he’s seen a fairy.’

Hugh said sharply, ‘Do try not to talk nonsense, Sally. . . . The old man is obviously unhinged and should see a psychiatrist. . . . Now about this overdraft. Here are the figures. What chance is there of reducing it, even a little?’

She ran her hand distractedly through her hair, and looked across at Matthew. ‘There are those cows, Matthew. We’re selling them this week, aren’t we? They ought to bring £35 each.’

‘Nearer twenty-five,’ said Matthew in a voice of doom, and Sally laughed.

‘That means we’ll get about £30. In the end the price always splits the difference between Matt’s view and mine. . . . I suppose the horrible bank could have most of that.’

‘And what’s you goin’ to live on till the wool’s sold? Your hangers-on take some feeding. Arch’s all right, but the old bastard tucks it away like mad.’

‘Oh Matthew, I don’t think you should call Father’s uncle an old bastard,’ said Sally in half-hearted remonstrance, but Matthew only muttered that in his opinion something was wrong, because there was no more likeness between them than between himself and the Queen of England.

Ignoring this flight of fancy, Hugh said, ‘It certainly seems an expensive household for you to maintain. Does this sailor drink? They usually do.’

Sally flared up. ‘He drinks one bottle of beer every night, which he pays for himself, so there’s no need to report to the bank manager that we’re having orgies,’ she said rudely.

Matthew frowned. That wasn’t the way to talk to an eligible admirer. He tried to explain. ‘Arch is no cadger. He brings stuff home and he’s always ready to lend a hand. Buildin’ some sort of contraption at the bottom of the garden. He

calls it a gazzy-bo—a heathenish name he must have learnt in his travels.'

Before Hugh had time to assimilate this surprising information, the door opened and the gaunt figure of Aloysius Leigh appeared on the threshold. With no apology at all, he aired an obvious grievance. 'Archie says that we're short of milk. Does that mean that the little people will not have their quota tonight?'

Hugh looked completely taken aback, but Sally said cheerily, 'Oh, there's enough. Put out the little dish for the fairies,' and the old man unbent so far as to thank her.

Hugh said, 'My dear Sally, is this a mad-house? Milk for the fairies. . . . The old man should surely be certified.'

'Oh no. He's very much all there, except on this one point, and it makes him happy to think the fairies come in the night and drink the milk.'

'But . . . I suppose it's your cat?'

'Oh no. Jeremy never touches milk. It's the hedgehogs. I can hear them grunting while they drink it. Luckily Uncle Aloysius can't.'

'Good God!' said Hugh in awed tones, and Matthew felt deep sympathy for him. Suddenly the lawyer was sorry for Sally; why should she have to support this unpleasant and certainly mad old man and this superfluous sailor? She had enough to worry her already. He said kindly, 'Well, if you and Matthew think you can spare a hundred pounds when the cows are sold, I'll see the bank manager and I'm sure he'll let the overdraft go on. He tells me you mean to pay it off when the farm is sold.'

'When,' repeated Sally slowly. 'But it takes so long. Mr Ford sent a man out the other day who seemed interested, but they make out they are and then they disappear, and you don't hear any more of them. I feel—well, as if things will never straighten out.'

Both men stared at her. This was entirely unlike Sally. They spoke with one breath. 'You don't want to get your tail down,' began Matthew, and 'You mustn't get down-hearted,' said Hugh more politely, and went on to explain the

delays and negotiations which the sale of a property entailed. He had never seen her even momentarily depressed before, and it had a curious effect upon him. Vaguely he thought that something must be done about it; she was carrying a burden quite beyond her years and strength. Once they were quit of this unsatisfactory farm, it would be possible to . . . To do what? Davenport dodged the question. Of course he was fond of Sally, but she did the most unpredictable things and Hugh liked a woman to be predictable. Even her devotion to old Matthew would present a problem; impossible to imagine him in the home of a rising barrister. . . . He put the future firmly from his thoughts, returned the documents to his brief-case, and decided to enjoy the evening without looking beyond it.

But of course the sale was disappointing. It was a day when there were too many old cows being offered, and Sally's were knocked down for £25. Matthew had been right this time. It was a blow, and for a moment she thought what a relief it would be to shed a few tears. But, she told herself, for tears to be really satisfactory, you had to have a shoulder to cry on. Very occasionally in the old days she had brought her troubles to her father and wept in his arms. Now there wasn't any shoulder, except, of course, Matt's, and she didn't fancy that.

The thought of what he would say if she attempted such a performance cheered her up, and she was smiling when she met Simon outside the yards. He said, 'Damned poor sale, Sally. Those cows were worth more. Your luck was out.'

'Oh well, what does it matter?' she said with deliberate gaiety, and then, 'Simon, I'm going to the library to change my books. Have you got any of your men to join up?'

'Yes, several of them. I didn't know they were so keen on books, but I rather think it's the girl more than the books.'

'She's nice, isn't she?'

'Very.' Sally was surprised at the word. Simon wasn't often enthusiastic about a girl. Obviously Judith appealed to him and . . . and why not? In a moment the great solution appeared once more. Why hadn't she thought of Judith before? Here was the very girl for Simon, and almost at his front



door. She could hardly hide her pleasure at the thought, and, when she went into the little library, she looked at Judith with new eyes. Just the one for Simon, a quiet, dignified girl, and very attractive. She would make the most wonderful manager's wife and end all Simon's troubles. Sally would do everything to encourage it. She liked Judith and had been annoyed when a murmur of gossip reached her, when some fool had actually said that the girl at the library wasn't as strait-laced as she seemed, and had hinted at 'goings-on'. What nonsense that was. Of course people always talked about a girl who chose to live alone.

Today at the sale she had heard these rumours again and had hotly denied them. This time it was even sillier. Someone actually said they had seen a man leaving the cottage late at night. Sally had said furiously, 'Someone wanting a book, and why not? Judith can't afford to turn subscribers away, and why shouldn't a man call at the library?' She had settled that, but it had made her angry. Now, with the thought of Simon's happiness at stake, she must take a more definite and decided stand. She must show these malicious talkers that she was Judith's friend, call in whenever she could and presently, when things were a little less hectic, ask her to the farm for the week-end. But, first of all, she must take her to Luthens.

She poured all this out to Alice the next time her friend came to the farm, but for once Alice looked a little dubious. 'I'm sure Judith is all you say, and I'd love you to bring her to see me, but let Simon manage his own affairs. You've got far too much on hand as it is.'

She had been slightly appalled when she met Sally's extraordinary household and saw the tottering gazebo on which Archie was triumphantly daubing the yellow paint which he had insisted on buying.

'Nothing like a bit of yellow to brighten things up,' he had said, adding to Sally's dismay, 'I thought I'd just give a lick round the windows and perhaps the verandah posts. Make the house look a bit gay.'

Sally murmured something about only showing up the

rest of the shabbiness, but Archie's blood was up and he would not be deterred. 'I know we're going to end up with a red house with yellow windows,' she told Alice and Trevor Moore.

For once the doctor had accompanied his wife and it was he who said, 'Sally, for God's sake pull in your horns. Leave Simon alone. You've got more than enough on your plate now. Just stop minding everybody's business.'

Indeed, it seemed to the doctor an entirely crazy household for at lunch Uncle Aloysius had held the floor and dealt at length with Sir Conan Doyle's experiences, between wolfing large quantities of food and silencing Archie who tried to talk about gazzy-bos. After lunch the old man had mercifully left them and gone off with his camera to the bush reserve, declaring that he had certainly seen 'something' the day before, and repudiating with scorn Matthew's ill-tempered suggestion that it was probably Daisy's calf.

But he left a feeling of depression behind him and Sally caught herself sighing deeply. If only she had never written to the old man . . . but she had been so sorry for him; it sounded so dull and lonely never to have married and to have no one to look after him in his old age. Now she was haunted by a fear that this might be her lot.

But it was impossible for her to be depressed for long and presently she was telling Trevor and Alice that things were really looking up, that the bank had been 'staved off', and that soon a buyer would turn up who would give a splendid price for the farm so that there would be enough money left over for Matthew and her to buy a little place somewhere where they could milk a few cows, keep hens, grow vegetables, and probably have a small but profitable orchard. It would be big enough, she explained, for them to take with them the few animals they really cared for, old Tip, their sheep-dog, Jeremy the cat, Daisy who was such a splendid milker, and the horse that had been her father's and which Sally loved to ride when she had time. 'And there's sure to be a hunt near where we're going,' she said illogically, 'because Trigger jumps so well and I adore riding him.'

'And your uncle?' Trevor unkindly prompted at this moment.

He was airily dismissed. When the farm was sold, of course he would go back to Australia, where he seemed to get on very well with the fairy population.

It all sounded so cheerful that Alister, who had been depressed ever since Uncle Aloysius had repelled his advances by saying, 'Get down, dog,' now cheered up and lifted his head from his paws, watching Sally hopefully. She said, 'Poor darling, he's bored. You've depressed him. Let's take him for a walk.'

The magic word was enough. Alister leapt to his feet and with a headlong rush was out of the house, running in ecstatic circles over the newly-dug ground.

Archie, who was balanced precariously on a ladder, 'licking on' yellow paint, turned and saw him and made the mistake of calling out, 'Hi, fellow.' Alister, always madly and mistakenly friendly, dashed towards him and attempted unsuccessfully to climb the ladder and reach his new friend.

Alice, Sally, and Trevor stood helpless, and watched while the ladder swayed once, and then fell inwards. There was an appalling crash, an oath from Archie, a howl from Alister, and one wall of the gazebo lay in ruins. Sally gasped, 'Oh, it'll all come down and kill them,' and began to run wildly across the soft earth, followed by the other two.

But they were only in time to pick up the pieces. These, fortunately, consisted of the wall of the summer-house and not of Archie or Alister. But for a few moments Archie lay still, and Sally cried in dismay, 'He's hurt, his leg's broken,' and then, to her subsequent shame, 'Trevor, how long do broken legs take to mend?' For she had had a vivid picture of herself and Matthew nursing Archie back to health for many months, while Uncle Aloysius ate and ate and looked for fairies.

But it lasted only a minute, for Archie quickly picked himself up and said cheerily, 'That was a pretty good squall, but we weathered it. . . . My Gawd, look at the dog.'

Alister, who had escaped injury from the falling timber,

had unfortunately been caught by the tin of paint which Archie had been holding when the ladder collapsed. It had leapt from the sailor's clutching fingers as he fell and had emptied itself, neatly and accurately, over the Labrador's long and powerful tail. He stood there beaming upon them all, a black dog with a bright yellow tail, and Sally gazed at him with a consternation too deep for laughter.

But Alice merely said calmly, 'Never mind. It was his own fault and Trevor will have something to take it off. How lucky it was his tail, because you can always soak a tail. But I'm so sorry he's damaged your summer-house, Archie.'

'That's all right, Missus. I'll tack her up again in no time, and maybe the ship'll be put off a week or two, then I can put a bit of trellis round the verandah.'

Sally's heart sank; she was fond of Archie, but a month was long enough, and she had a vivid mental picture of a bright yellow trellis tottering and zig-zagging along the verandah. Still, on the whole she had got off lightly. Even that would be better than nursing Archie indefinitely with a broken leg.

As Sally had feared, matters soon came to a head between Matthew and Aloysius. She entered the house next day to hear her uncle's high, furious voice, and to catch Matthew's shocking reply. 'You, what cadges on a bit of a girl an' never brings home a sausage ...'

In the kitchen the three of them were dramatically grouped, Aloysius with trousers bearing too eloquent witness to Archie's devotion to yellow paint, Matthew actually with chin out-thrust almost into his antagonist's face, and Archie divided between sympathy and laughter. Before she could speak, she was amazed by Aloysius turning upon her and demanding that she should 'dismiss this impudent old man immediately'.

Sally fell back a pace in genuine astonishment, and echoed feebly, 'Dismiss Matthew?' Could she be hearing rightly?

'Yes. He insulted me. You see these trousers?' It was an unnecessary question; with their vivid yellow blotches, they were only too striking. 'I sat down upon the verandah seat to contemplate. Where else should one sit? The result is a pair of valuable trousers ruined by this young man's gross carelessness.'

'But, Uncle, you knew he was painting the verandah.' Sally faltered, but Aloysius swept on.

'Naturally I demanded that he should pay for their cleaning. A moderate request, for they may be beyond that, and I may be forced to buy a new pair.'

'An' if you are, it's the first time your hand's dipped in your pocket since you come to this house,' interpolated Matthew, and Archie gave an irrepressible giggle.



'Matthew, don't. . . . Uncle Aloysius, I'm sorry Matthew has been rude, but . . .'

This was a mistake. Archie came to the defence of his ally. 'It was the chocolate was too much for him,' he said cryptically, and Sally looked from one to another in bewilderment.

'A trifle to sustain my strength,' Uncle Aloysius began, but Matthew interrupted, 'His bloody bag full of it—cakes and cakes. . . . An' did he ever offer you a crumb?' the old man asked dramatically. Sally struggled with a dreadful desire to laugh. So that was the reason for the overpowering smell in Aloysius' room. She said, with as much rebuke as she dared, 'Matthew, it's Uncle Aloysius' own business what he has in his room.'

The protest was immediate. 'If you think I'd go pokin' in his stinkin' things, you don't know me, Sally. I went in for my own torch what I lent him last night and he hadn't the decency to return, and stumbled over the box and it fell open—acres of chocolate, an' you what never has any extras, except what Arch here brings, and feeding him like a fighting cock.'

Uncle Aloysius loftily ignored these charges, merely reiterating his demand for Matthew's instant dismissal.

Sally took a deep breath. It was dreadful to have to insult an old man and her father's uncle. Even as she thought this it occurred to her that never had she heard James Leigh refer to Aloysius, except once, laughing, as 'that mad old geezer in Australia'. . . . Still, he was her father's uncle. But Matthew—Matthew was far more; he was her father's friend and hers—her dearest friend. She said, 'You don't understand, Uncle. I couldn't send Matthew away—not for anyone or anything. He belongs here just as much as I do. We share everything. If—I'm sorry, but if you can't stay here with him, then I'm afraid—I'm afraid it's you who'll have to go.'

It was out. She had practically driven a seventy-year-old relation from her doors. She was covered with shame, the more so because of the open triumph of Matthew and Archie Brown. In fact, in an ecstasy of pleasure, Archie was pumping the old man's hand up and down and inviting him to 'come

right away on the back of the bike to the pub to celebrate'.

But the most amazing thing was Aloysius' reaction to his niece's ultimatum. He seemed neither shocked nor hurt; a trifle annoyed, perhaps, but not enough to deflect him for a moment from his chosen task. He shrugged, said, 'As you will, my dear niece, although it seems to me deplorable to be in the clutches of this ignorant old man. However, I can ignore him. I shall go my way and forget him,' and off he went, the inevitable camera over his shoulder, his mind intent on his goal.

The other three were left staring at each other. Never had there been a more complete anti-climax. Sally fell into a fit of almost hysterical laughter and Matthew said, 'He'll ignore me, will he? We'll bloody well see who ignores who,' but it was Archie who looked thoughtful and presently, when Sally had recovered, asked her, 'Does the old geezer—beg pardon, does the old—er—gentleman mean to stay here till he sees a fairy? Fair dinkum?'

Sally nodded. 'Yes. That's all he wants. To take a photograph of a fairy back to his crazy friends in that mad society in Australia. But I can't see that helps us much, as he'll never see one.'

'Not being a fairy,' said Archie with extreme logic, 'I can't rightly say, but it seems to me that he's not the sort of old bloke what a fairy would cotton on to.'

'Any right-thinking fairy,' declared Matthew who had now recovered his sense of humour and was rather preening himself on his enemy's defeat, 'would give that old bastard a wide berth.'

'Oh Matthew,' Sally felt bound to remonstrate. 'You mustn't call him an old bastard.' She had said it before and she was to say it again, for from that day Matthew referred to Aloysius Leigh only by that rather unpleasant title. On the whole, Sally thought, she could not grudge it to Matthew.

In spite of the complications of her difficult household, Sally's spirits were rising, for the campaign on Simon and Judith's behalf was going with a tremendous swing. If Judith wondered a little at Sally's enthusiastic friendship, she still

was pleased by it. She was lonely in Queensville and occasionally uneasily aware of a touch of hostility towards herself. She couldn't afford that. This little library had to be a success, and that would only happen if people liked her. She was puzzled by the reserve that had suddenly sprung up amongst a few of her subscribers, puzzled and hurt and all the more grateful for Sally's warmth.

She possessed no car but had several times cycled to the farm and had spent a long and delightful Sunday there. Like Alice, she was a little startled by the strange household, dismayed by the curious erection at the end of the garden which Archie had triumphantly reconstructed and painted bright yellow, very embarrassed by Aloysius Leigh's dissertation on fairies at lunch-time, and especially by his assertion that they were not far away. But she liked Matthew, whose quality she realised, and whose irritable devotion to Sally she appreciated, and she was happy with Sally and her eager friendship.

'Yes, several of the men from Luthens have joined,' she told Sally. 'Mr Hunter is very good. He takes out quite a lot of books for himself and I find ones that his aunt likes. . . . No, I haven't met Mrs Forster yet, but she sent a kind message asking me to go there any Sunday.'

That was enough for Sally—who never did things by halves. It was particularly promising that Aunt Dorothy appeared to be encouraging this friendship. Sally knew that the old lady never did anything without good reason. She had not been surprised when Simon told her that his aunt had never been deceived by the so-called engagement, and it was a relief to her to know that this old friend understood the whole situation and probably guessed what Sally was trying to do. In this case she appeared to approve of it.

Alice was still a little circumspect in her encouragement. To her husband she said, 'Judith's a very nice girl, though she's awfully reserved. I don't think Sally knows a thing about her. But I suppose reticence is a good thing.'

'A contrast, at any rate, to our Sally, with everything on the surface.'

'That's where you're wrong, Trevor. Sally seems like that,

but she hides things too. She never talks about her troubles. Nowadays she hardly speaks about the farm or her future. I think she's awfully worried when she lets herself be.'

'It's a worrying situation, especially with all those hangers-on. . . . Does Davenport come in on it anywhere?'

'I don't know. I don't think he knows either, and I'm sure Sally doesn't. He's fond of her, but I can't see that young man marrying a girl from a bankrupt farm.'

'Who does rather extraordinary things, as even you must admit, my dear. I mean, this insane engagement to young Hunter. . . .'

'Yes, that's frightfully difficult. However, Sally's taking Judith to Luthens on Sunday and she seems to have great hopes.'

This was an understatement. Sally was full of confidence and even dared to say to Matthew, 'I do feel that once Simon is off my hands, everything else will look up. We'll probably sell the farm much better than we expect, and—and Uncle Aloysius will see a fairy (though how I can't think) and go back to Australia, and, once Archie goes, you can push the summer-house over, and . . .'

'Arch is all right and his gazy-bo don't worry me. It'll be easy fixed. The thing is to fix the old bastard. When would you be likely to come home this afternoon?'

Sally was surprised. Matthew did not often try to tie her down to times. She said vaguely, 'Oh late, but don't bother about a meal. I'll scratch something up.'

What mattered was to make sure that Judith and Simon fell in love, and then she could say 'Bless you, my children,' and go and confess the whole silly plot to Mr Ford, who, she felt, would certainly forgive her provided Simon acquired a suitable wife. She even went so far as to picture Simon and Judith walking down the aisle, followed by herself as bridesmaid—and then she stopped short. Why should she suddenly feel neglected and left out? This was ridiculous. It would be a relief to be done with this silly pretence, but still . . . She supposed vaguely that she had got used to being engaged to Simon and that in any case she was depressed, and inclined,

of all horrible indulgences, to feel sorry for herself. She made up for it by being extremely gay as the girls drove to Luthens, but suddenly a horrid thought struck her and she turned to Judith and asked, 'You don't get allergies, do you?'

'Allergies? You mean hay fever, and coming out in spots if you eat oysters? No, I've never had an allergy in my life.'

'And you've often been on sheep stations, haven't you?'

'Oh yes. I spent most of my holidays on farms.'

'And never sneezed at sheep?'

'Of course not. Why on earth should I?'

'No reason, except that one girl who came to Luthens burst out in spots and it was very disappointing.'

'Why disappointing?'

By quite unnecessarily turning too sharply into the Luthens gate and flinging her passenger against the window, Sally managed to evade this question. 'Here we are,' she said brightly. 'Don't the stock look flourishing?'

From the first moment Judith was a success. She was interested in the station and talked intelligently and without quoting poetry; Aunt Dorothy obviously liked her, and after lunch the girls went out with Simon to inspect some new grass which was just showing through. Here they were joined by one of the married couples on the station and presently Simon suggested that they should all climb a steep hill behind the house to get a view of more of the land. Sally was disappointed when Judith said, 'If you don't mind, I'll just wait here. I ricked my ankle the other day and it doesn't take kindly to hill climbing. You won't be very long, will you?'

Sally resisted the temptation to suggest that Simon should remain with his guest, and they set off for the short, steep climb up the hill. Thence they had a good view of the flats that made up the most valuable part of the large station, and Sally listened absorbedly to the talk between the others. Presently she said wistfully, 'It must be marvellous to be able to work the land properly, to have the men and the money and see things going ahead, instead . . .' Here she stopped quickly and said very brightly. 'But let's go down and find Judith. She must be tired of sitting there waiting. I didn't



know about her ankle, but then she never makes a fuss.'

They went back to the grassy bank where they had left the visitor, but Judith had vanished. 'She must have gone back to Aunt Dorothy,' Sally said, and bade goodbye to their companions. 'Come along, Simon, and see what she would like to do now.'

'All right. In a minute. But I want to go into the wool-shed first. I left my tally-book there yesterday. Are you coming, or can't you bear a nasty smelly wool-shed?'

'Now, Simon, don't be silly. You know I only said that last time to cover up poor Nan's sneezes. Isn't Judith different? You can always depend on her to behave well, and . . .'

At this moment Sally stopped abruptly, for Simon had flung open the door of the wool-shed and there was Judith. Nor was she behaving well. She was clasped in the arms of a tall and handsome young man.

The pair turned as the door opened and for a moment Sally lost her head and would have fled if Judith had not called her back. She had extricated herself from the stranger's embrace but was still clutching his hand tightly, and her usually pale face was flooded with bright colour. But she was not really embarrassed and, as Sally murmured some incoherent apology, she laughed with what her friend felt was regrettable abandon.

'Don't, Sally. . . . And Mr Hunter, please don't look so embarrassed. . . . Sally, this is Ian Fraser, one of the Luthens shepherds.'

'Oh yes,' said Sally, utterly deflated and a little angry. 'I remember. One of your library subscribers.'

It was a silly remark, but there was no need for the pair to smile at each other as they did. Sally felt resentful and furiously disappointed. Simon didn't like girls who flirted, and it was only too obvious that Judith was doing so. As she saw the failure of all her plans, Sally was not only angry but puzzled. She had thought that Judith was not the sort of girl to fall into anyone's arms, and she had only known this particular young man since he had joined the library. Could she have been mistaken in the girl all the time?

Ian had dropped Judith's hand and was addressing himself to Simon. 'I guess you're wondering what I'm up to, Mr Hunter,' he said, 'and we'd better tell you the truth. Don't you think so, Judith?'

'Yes. I've wanted to tell Sally anyway, and of course you must tell Mr Hunter.'

Sally suddenly felt very excited and emotional for no reason, and exclaimed, 'Oh Judith, do you mean that you two are engaged or in love or something?'

'We're in love,' said the girl smiling, 'but we're not engaged. We're married.'

It should, Sally thought afterwards, have been a tremendous blow, but for some reason, as she saw the pair standing there, and thought how pretty Judith looked with that bright colour in her face, she felt a pang of joy—a pang? But you didn't feel pangs with joy. Could it be envy? She put the thought firmly from her head and heard herself saying delightedly, 'Oh, how perfectly splendid. . . . But how quick. . . . Why, you've only known each other a few weeks. . . . It's amazing.'

'Not so amazing as all that,' Ian said and smiled. 'Judith and I've known each other for quite a time and we were married a year ago, just before I came to Luthens. We've had to wait till we could find some reason for Judith to come here too.'

Sally turned with a puzzled face and looked unhappily at Simon. He must be heart-broken. But he appeared to be perfectly normal and smiled at the lovers as he said, 'Let's sit down on these wool bales while you tell us all about it. Better to talk here, because I suppose you don't want it broadcast.'

'Oh no,' Judith said quickly. 'Whatever happens, only you and Sally must know. It would ruin everything if it got out.'

This was too mysterious for Sally. 'Why? Why shouldn't you be married?'

'Because of Ian's father. But you tell them, Ian.'

The young man sounded angry. 'It's quite mad, but the truth is my father is—well, he's the most obstinate man on God's earth, and he's got a thing about early marriage. He had an unfortunate one himself—married when he was

twenty to a kid of eighteen, and of course it broke up. Then, when he was over forty, he married my mother who was the same age. It was a good set-up and they were very happy, but she died when I was five. Since then he's been like a dog with one pup—and an old dog at that.'

Sally thought this rather unkind and said, 'But, if his marriage was happy in the end, why doesn't he want you to marry?'

'He's got this obsession—don't marry till you're thirty. Not that I'm a chicken. I'm over twenty-seven and Judith's twenty-three. But he just hammers on—till a man's thirty he doesn't know his own mind.'

'How silly. Twenty-seven's practically thirty. He must be very set in his opinions, if you don't mind my saying so, Ian,' for Sally was entering whole-heartedly into this romance.

'I'll say he's set. He's as obstinate as they come, with the devil of a temper and a bad heart.'

'How awful. People like that have such a way of holding their bad hearts over you, if you know what I mean.'

'I know damned well. Well, when I tried to tell him I'd fallen in love with a grand girl, he went off the handle and wouldn't even hear her name. We had a hell of a row and I packed up and came down here. The last thing he said was, if I was such a fool as to marry before I was thirty, I need never think I could set foot on the place again.'

This seemed incredible to Sally, and Judith said sadly, 'And Ian loves the farm. He's worked so hard on it. He really loves his father too, but—well, dear, you know you've got just a little bit of the same temper and . . .'

Sally laughed. 'So you came away and married Judith out of hand?'

Ian grinned. 'Well, wouldn't you?' he asked Simon. 'How could any man put up with that sort of thing? . . . And I haven't had a word from the old devil since I've been here—a year now.' In spite of 'the old devil' his face was wistful.

'And, as soon as I could find anything to do, I came to Queensville,' Judith said.

A light dawned on Sally and she said, 'Oh, now I under-

stand what those fools of women were talking about—those people who said they'd seen a man coming out of the library late at night. They weren't making it up after all.'

'Blast,' said Ian, quietly but fervently. 'I should have been more careful. I suppose, darling, I shouldn't have let you come to that hole. It would have been better for you if you'd stayed away.'

Judith said nothing, but her eyes were eloquent, and Simon brought this tender interlude to a close by saying practically, 'I suppose there's no way out of it? I mean, if you were married, you could have one of the cottages and everything would be okay.'

'I won't risk it,' said Judith very firmly. 'I'd love it, but it might ruin everything. It's a nuisance if people talk, but . . .'

'Oh, what does that matter?' asked Sally gaily, and Simon looked disapproving.

'You may have noticed that is a favourite saying of Sally's and a very foolish one,' he said, sounding so elderly that Sally longed to hit him. 'Of course it matters. Surely your father wouldn't expect you to wait two years?'

'I tell you, this is an obsession. Any discussion of it makes him fairly berserk. And he's had one coronary already.'

'It's nothing but blackmail,' said Sally hotly. 'I'm sorry, Ian, but even if he is your father, I don't feel that I really like him.'

Here, Simon intervened and said they must think it over and some solution must be possible, until he was rudely interrupted by Sally's remark that a whole lot of platitudes never comforted anyone. Thereupon they took their leave, telling the other two that they would somehow explain Judith's absence to Mrs Forster.

'I'll say you're fascinated by the view,' said Sally brightly, and Simon retaliated for her remark about platitudes by saying that Judith must have surely noticed that Sally enjoyed lying for its own sake. Then they made their way back to the house in a rather inimical silence which Sally unfortunately broke presently by a very loud and gusty sigh and a murmur of, 'I'm sorry, Simon. Awfully sorry.'

He turned to her in surprise. He certainly hadn't liked her remark about platitudes, nor did he appreciate being made fun of in front of one of his men, but he had not expected any apology.

He said, 'That's all right. I know you like to be funny at all costs.'

'Funny? I don't think it's funny. I think it's terribly disappointing.'

He stopped dead and looked down at her. 'Whatever's the matter? Are you talking about those cows you sold the other week? It was damned bad luck, old girl, but that sort of thing happens. I know you're having a poor time, but it'll pass. Once you've sold the farm and . . .'

She broke in impatiently. 'Oh, do stop talking about the farm and the silly old cows. I've forgotten all about them. Don't you ever think of anything but stock and farms? Haven't you got any soul at all, Simon?'

This time he knew she was raving. He had never heard Sally mention a soul before, and no one was more interested in stock and land than she. He said, 'I simply don't know what you're talking about. If it isn't the farm, what is it? You sighed like a furnace and looked miserable. What did you mean?'

'I meant Judith and Ian, of course.'

'Oh, I see. Yes, it's hard luck, and the father must be an obstinate old cow. Of course he uses that bad heart to bully Ian. But it'll come right and they seem happy enough at the moment. No use making a fuss about it. She's a nice girl, but you haven't known her very long so it's no good taking it to heart. That's a habit of yours—getting het up about everybody else's business. You've got enough without . . .'

'Without caring about you, I suppose,' she flashed, now thoroughly roused by his lecturing. 'Oh, I suppose I'm silly to bother about anyone so heartless and ungrateful as you, but I was so pleased. . . . Judith sounded just the one. She's nice and Aunt Dorothy likes her, and . . .'

Sally suddenly stopped talking. There was something ominous about Simon's silence and his eyes had never left



her face as she talked. Now he said slowly, 'Do you mean that this time you thought you'd marry me to Judith? Sally, I think you're getting as obsessed as your old uncle, only fairies are more harmless. Is that what's biting you? You were plotting again, plotting this time to marry me to Judith West—not that she would have me, of course. But doesn't it occur to you that I might like to choose my own girl and live my own life?'

He was angry now, standing glaring at her, and Sally felt more miserable than ever. She said in a forlorn voice, 'But it's so awkward being engaged when you're not. I thought you'd be glad to find a nice girl and get rid of me, and . . .'

Abruptly he began to laugh. 'My God, Sally, you're a menace. . . . Full of plots and schemes. And you used to be such a nice, simple little girl.'

No-one likes to be called a nice, simple little girl, and Sally said crossly, 'Plots and schemes indeed. What you don't see is that it's my business as well as yours. Once you're really engaged to someone else . . .'

She stopped, wondering why all at once this did not seem such a rosy prospect.

There was a silence and then, to her surprise, Simon asked, 'Tell me, Sally, did your father—did Mr Leigh often spank you when you were a kid?'

'Spank me? What a vulgar word. Of course not. Father never spanked me in his life'

'A pity,' said Simon tersely, and without another word turned and walked quickly back to the house.

Sally's visit was not going well. When they returned to the house, Simon made an excuse to go out and see to some stock and did not ask her to go with him. She spent an hour with Aunt Dorothy who, she decided, must be told about Judith's marriage and could be trusted to repeat the news to no one. Aunt Dorothy listened with her usual occasional vague comments and expressed, for her, strong disapproval of old Mr Fraser's attitude. 'But you know how it is, dear—only one child, and old parents and a weak heart. It makes them so unreasonable,' though whether it was the heart, the age, or the fact of achieving only one child that was to blame Sally could not quite understand.

At three o'clock Sally said, 'I think I'd better go home. Ian will bring Judith later when it's dark. She's staying with me tonight and cycling home in the morning. I heard Simon suggesting it,' and did not add that Simon had not suggested Sally's staying also.

Mrs Forster did not try to detain her, but patted her arm with the cryptic remark, 'Don't be down-hearted, dear. You did your best and perhaps next time?' She nodded encouragingly as she kissed her goodbye. There was no doubt, Sally thought as she drove depressedly home, that Aunt Dorothy knew exactly what was going on.

It had been rather a miserable day and the last straw was to receive a most unwelcoming glare from Matthew when she entered the house.

'Thought you was comin' late,' he said, and glanced uneasily over his shoulder.

'What's the matter with you?' Sally asked crossly, 'and

why are you trying to keep me from going into my own dining-room?’

‘Now don’t fly off the handle,’ he implored her unjustly. ‘I’ll say straight that perhaps it was a liberty, but you’re the easy-goin’ kind and not one to make a fuss about people usin’ things. So I says to Arch, “Go ahead. She won’t turn a hair. She’s got her faults, an’ I’m the first to admit them, but to get mad because you borrowed something—well, that’s not our Sally.”’

She stared at him in surprise and exasperation. ‘Do tell me what’s up and don’t go trying to smooth me down beforehand. It doesn’t suit your style. Oh, hullo, Archie, what have you two been up to?’ The sailor was coming hurriedly out of the dining-room, a newspaper parcel thrust under one arm. Looking over his shoulder, Sally was amazed to see her sewing-machine on the table.

‘It’s like this, Sally,’ he began in just the same propitiatory voice that Matthew had used. ‘I’m quite handy with a machine. You won’t find I’ve damaged it. Us sailors have to be able to turn our hands to most things, and when your underclothes is coming to pieces, why a machine’s quicker than trying to tackle them by hand,’ and actually he was blushing.

Sally laughed. ‘What a fuss about nothing. Of course use the machine, Archie. But why not give me the—er—garments to mend? I always see to Matthew’s things, and I’m not a bit shocked by underpants.’

He pressed the parcel more firmly to his side and burred thanks and assurances that the job was done. Then he hurried out, and so different was his manner from his usual easy assurance that Sally stared after him and so caught a brief glimpse of something pale pink exuding from the parcel. Pale pink. It was impossible to associate Archie with pale pink. But Sally was tired and disgruntled tonight and felt that everybody was unreasonable and unaccountable and she didn’t care what colour or material Archie chose for his underwear. It was his business, and Simon’s words about her weakness for minding other people’s business were still rankling. Tonight everything seemed wrong.

And then next day the whole future suddenly opened before Sally. After months of waiting and hope deferred, when she and Matthew had finally given up all thought of selling the farm until the spring, and were concentrating their energies in 'staving off' the bank and the bill for top-dressing—suddenly a buyer appeared who not only meant business but very quickly accomplished it. John Gardiner spent the morning going carefully over the farm and by mid-day had bought it. It was, he said, the sort of little place that would work in with his big farm further back; he could hold stock here, and use it for dealing. No, the house didn't matter; later he might put a man in but for the present it would remain empty, so that there was no hurry for Miss Leigh to get out if it suited her to stay for a while. It all seemed incredible.

She was still feeling dazed that evening when Simon called in and she told him the news. 'And so it's really sold at last and we'll be out of it in another month,' she said, and then, to her surprise and shame, Sally put her head down on the kitchen table and burst into tears. 'He—he didn't even mind the gazebo,' she whimpered foolishly, and tried to laugh.

Simon looked very unhappy. He hadn't seen the girl cry since she was ten and had lost her kitten. Then he had put his arm round her and patted her and got her another kitten next day. Now it wasn't as easy as that.

'Never mind, Sally,' he began inadequately. 'The thing to do is to get another farm somewhere round here where the going will be easier and all your friends near.'

Surprising even herself, Sally said, 'I won't get a farm near. Anyway, there aren't any little places, and the land's too dear. Matthew and I are going right away.'

Simon didn't like this idea at all. He didn't want Sally to be somewhere where he didn't know what was happening to her. He wanted to be able to keep an eye on her, to look in and scold her and quarrel with her, and generally go on as they had been doing. He said, 'I'm sure I could find some little place near Luthens,' and Sally's voice came out in a squeak of anger. She sat up, mopped her eyes, and said, 'Can't

you understand that there won't be much money when everything's paid off? Just enough for a few acres where we can take Daisy and Trigger and Tip, and milk a few cows and Matt can grow vegetables. I've made up my mind,' and, considering that the idea had only been born a few minutes ago, this was amazing, but true. Then she went on more calmly, 'I do despise moaners, but it's been rather an upsetting day. It's happened so suddenly. . . . And I'm wondering where Uncle Aloysius is; it's getting dark and he's always so punctual for dinner. He loves food,' she added unkindly.

Simon moved impatiently. This was a Sally he did not understand. He said, 'Surely you're not worried about that old man? He can look after himself.'

'I know, but he said he was going up to the bush after one of his fairies.'

Simon laughed. They were an extraordinary household. He said, 'There isn't enough bush on this place for even that old fool to get lost in,' and at that moment Matthew appeared, saying pointedly, 'I'm worryin' too. Not that he's lost. I'm afraid he isn't,' and almost as he muttered this impious wish, they heard the old man's footsteps hurrying across the verandah. Simon said a hurried goodnight and disappeared. Uncle Aloysius was more than he could take tonight.

When the old man came into the room, even Matthew was startled. He was almost gibbering with excitement and his camera was clasped in both hands. 'Got it,' he cried loudly and triumphantly. 'Got it at last.'

Sally clasped one hand to her head. Was she going mad? In a small voice she said, 'Got what? Not—not a fairy, Uncle Aloysius? Not in that case?' and then struggled with more hysterical laughter.

'A photograph,' the old man said impatiently. 'A photograph that will prove to all the world that I have always been right. Fairies live in the bush. I knew it. They will only come to those who are favoured, and the little people love me.'

'If they do,' muttered Matt to the grinning Archie, 'they're madder than him.'

'But I can't understand. Do you really mean that you



think you have a photograph of a fairy in our bush?' asked poor Sally, for whom all this was the last straw.

'I saw her, perched on a lovely tree fern. . . . A dainty lady, all in pink. . . . A tiny but perfect miniature—I crept closer—I dared not breathe. Very silently I brought up my camera and—and just in time I caught her.'

'Caught her? Do you mean—really caught her?' asked Sally, and for some reason this seemed exquisitely funny to both Archie and Matthew. 'Oh Matt, do stop sniggering. I think I must be going mad. . . . Did you catch a fairy, Uncle?'

He looked at her with scorn. 'One does not handle fairies. One does not pursue them, as if they were rats or weasels. . . . I caught her with the lens of my camera. But she heard the click, and with a whisk of her little skirt, she was gone.'

There was complete silence for a minute, broken most inappropriately by a guffaw from Archie. Aloysius Leigh glared in his direction, and then said with a sort of deadly venom, 'You have jeered at me. You have laughed behind my back. When you see this photograph, you will grovel.'

This was too much for Sally who gave a feeble giggle and then was ashamed. The poor old man was really mad at last. What should she do? When he had that wretched film developed and found that it was all a mistake, would he become violent?

But Aloysius was a surprising person. Putting his camera very carefully on the table he said, 'And now for dinner. . . . I confess that I am very hungry. The excitement. . . . Ah, thank you, Sally. A good roast dinner is just what I need.'

As they ate, she told him about the sale of the farm, but he was not at all interested, merely pointing out that, as he would now depart as soon as possible for Australia, he would not be able to assist them with the packing up. Later, when she was alone with the other two men, she voiced her fears about the photograph, but Archie laughed and said, 'I'd worry about that when it happens. Reckon he'd say it's a fairy whatever it is.'

When Archie, too, had gone to bed she and Matthew talked long about the sale of the farm, the disposal of their stock,

what lay ahead of them. The malicious amusement against Aloysius had left him and the old man was deeply depressed. Sally said, 'Mr Gardiner said we needn't hurry. He doesn't want the house at present.'

'Better clear out soon as we can. No point in hangin' on seeing another man's stock where ours were. Pack up and go, that's what I say.'

'Yes, but we've got to find a place to go to,' she pointed out, and then the old argument started. Matthew could get a job as handyman on a station and she could finish her physiotherapy course and get a good position and not be encumbered by a lame old man. Sally, who felt she could bear no more, said quite violently, 'Matt, I can't stand this sort of talk. Don't you understand you're all I've got left?' and her voice shook so that for a moment she was afraid she was going to burst into tears again, and this was a performance she deeply despised. Nothing for it but to be particularly bright, and so she suddenly said, 'How silly we are, going on as if someone had died. It's a jolly good thing we've sold and we've been trying to do it for ages. So let's celebrate. People always celebrate when they've made a good sale. Besides, it would be a farewell to Archie. What about it, Matt?'

With an effort he tried to hide for her sake, he said, 'Right you are, Sally. A party, eh?' and thought only of cheering this girl, and forgot how lost and miserable he would feel away from this place where he and James Leigh had worked so hard and where he and Sally had at last failed.

'Yes, a party. . . . Aunt Dorothy and Simon and the Moores and Judith West. We'd better have another man,' she added with great cunning. 'I know—we'll ask Ian Fraser, one of the Luthens shepherds. He knows Judith and he's nice.'

'That's the idea. Nothing like a party to cheer you up.'

'And I'll buy everything. I won't try to bake. We can afford that, and a few bottles of sherry, and some beer, can't we, Matt? We're capitalists, you know, and we've got to celebrate the fact.' The old man agreed with apparent heartiness. Archie was going next week, so they would have the party

on Saturday night 'and there's a good chance Uncle Aloysius will be gone before then,' Sally said hopefully.

Whether he was there or not. Aloysius Leigh was not likely to be interested in the party. His obsession had become more acute and he was up early next day, managed to cadge a lift into town, and was back before night with the developed film. Sally was dishing dinner when he arrived and she looked nervously at Archie for support. What would happen when he was disillusioned?

To her amazement he came skipping in, as excited as on the previous night, and flourishing a photograph which he allowed them to peer at but would not trust out of his own hands. Sally gazed at it and gasped. There was the large tree-fern that grew in the middle of their bush reserve, and on it—Sally rubbed her eyes and peered again—yes, on one spreading frond a small figure was seated. 'Let me look more closely. It can't be. . . . But it is. . . . It's something. . . . Yes, a tiny figure in white or some light colour. . . . But that's quite impossible. I can't believe it.'

Aloysius looked at her with scorn. 'Some poor mortals will believe nothing. But they cannot deny what the camera reveals. There she is, a dainty little lady, not unlike my friends upon the other side.'

For a wild moment Sally thought he was referring to the spirit world, but his next words were slightly reassuring, 'My little people on the other side of the Tasman, to whom I shall now return. Cannot even your eyes see the resemblance to those pictures which I showed you?'

'Well, I suppose so,' said Sally wildly. 'I mean, it isn't a Maori fairy. There's no sign of a mat or anything, or even a poi.'

There was an abrupt guffaw from the background and Archie disappeared abruptly into his room. It was obvious that the photograph had not overwhelmed him as it had Sally. 'How fortunate I was,' the old man was crooning. 'This is a very expensive camera, capable of recording in a split second, otherwise I should have missed her, for in a moment she was gone.'

Sally sighed helplessly. No doubt Uncle Aloysius was getting her down. She turned to Matthew and something in her weary face roused the old man's belligerency. He said unpleasantly, 'And now you've got what you wanted, I reckon you'll be off, eh? We're goin' to be busy here, and no time to cook for you all day long.'

Aloysius completely ignored this impertinent old man and said to his niece, 'And now I must be upon my way. My colleagues must get this news immediately. If I am quick, this photograph will appear in this month's journal. . . . Yes, I must be away. I booked my passage by air before I left town today.'

When dinner was over and Aloysius Leigh had gone to his bed, there doubtless to nibble chocolate and gloat on his photograph, the other three exchanged a long glance of exquisite relief. 'And that's that,' said Archie cheerily. 'Him gone and me going. . . . Soon you'll be on your own, you two—and about time.'

'Oh no, Archie, we're going to miss you awfully. You've never been any bother and you've helped a lot and kept us happy,' Sally said quickly, adding reluctantly, 'but of course Uncle Aloysius . . . Well, never mind. He's going. But I can't understand it at all. Did he fake that photograph, or was there something there? A white blackbird, perhaps? I've heard of them but I haven't seen any here. But no. It couldn't be that, because it had a skirt on,' and Sally sat down, suddenly feeling herself as mad as her great-uncle.

And then, with a careful closing of doors and a conspiratorial lowering of voices, they told her. From his room Archie brought a newspaper parcel and from it produced a doll in a frilly pink frock. 'Pink,' gasped Sally, 'and I thought it was your . . .' and then tried to cover her words.

'Fixed it up between us, we did,' Archie said, grinning at Matt. 'Had to do something to get the old geezer going. I got the doll at the store but they hadn't one dressed proper like, so I fixes that near enough with your machine that day when you come home early and nearly caught us. Then I tells him about something I'd seen up in the bush and he swallows the

bait. I was hiding there, and I set the doll up nice and perky on that fern tree and puts a bit of string round her waist.'

'But—but he said it vanished.'

'And so it did. I twitched the string quick and lively when he'd taken his photo, and it vanished into my pocket. I had a nasty minute wondering if he'd come crashing after it, but he didn't, so Matt and I lay low and waited.'

'Oh Matt, how could you?' Sally was divided between horror and laughter.

'Silly old bastard, caring about nothing but fairies and guzzling chocolate in his room and never offering any of us a bite,' said Matt unrepentantly.

Archie and Sally looked at his angry face and both burst out laughing. 'Oh well,' said Sally, 'it's made him awfully happy, and what does it matter?'



Sally was having a very pleasant morning. She had gone into town to drive Uncle Aloysius to the aerodrome and there had bidden him goodbye without one single regret but with a sense of infinite relief. Then she had proceeded to shop extensively for her party, and, because it was 'a celebration', indulged in a regular spree. The only flaw was that she was to have lunch with Hugh. As a rule she enjoyed this very much, but today she felt slightly guilty about the money she had spent, and a little apprehensive of being badly deflated by her legal adviser.

'A good thing I spent it before I knew how much money I had,' she said characteristically, and left all her parcels in the car so that Hugh's disapproving eye might not light on them. She was hurrying to his office when suddenly a voice behind her cried, 'It is Sally Leigh. Oh, I can hardly believe it. . . . Why, *Sally*,' and there was real warmth in the tone. Sally turned round and exclaimed with equal excitement, 'Caroline. What heaven. . . . Carol Layton. . . . And what are you doing here and how did you recognise my back?'

'It's a nice straight little back and, considering that I sat behind it for two years, I ought to know it. How perfectly lovely to meet you, because I'm feeling rather a waif. Don't say you live somewhere near?'

'Of course I do—only twenty miles away; and you don't look at all like a waif. You look lovelier than ever.' Sally did not usually pay such compliments, but this time she might be forgiven, for Caroline Layton really was beautiful, tall and slender with a perfect carriage, thick brown hair swept carelessly back, deep blue eyes and an aristocratic little

nose. She had always been the prettiest girl in the physiotherapy class and now she had blossomed, Sally thought, into something even lovelier.

She laughed at Sally's tribute; it was easy to see that she was used to coping with such remarks and entirely unspoilt by them. She said, 'I've come to the hospital, and I don't know a soul in this town. You're manna from Heaven.'

'But Carol, what happened to Stephen?'

She made a tiny grimace. 'Nothing. I just couldn't face life in a stuffy town. No, I'm not married or engaged or anything. Oh, do come and have lunch and talk.'

'I'd love to but I can't. I'm supposed to have lunch with Hugh Davenport. . . . Nothing exciting. Just my lawyer. I'm late now. But, Carol, I'm giving a party tomorrow night. This is Friday. Come out to the farm when you stop work and stay the week-end and meet my friends,' and with the words came once more the fatally familiar thought, 'Just the one for Simon. . . . Couldn't face town life. . . . She's lovelier than Elizabeth Gray and she's a real person. It's a case of third time lucky.'

It was arranged in a minute. Yes, Caroline had a small car—she was, Sally remembered, the sort of girl who always would have—and would come out that evening. 'And tomorrow see your farm and ride your horse, because you're sure to have one.'

Sally was still bubbling with excitement when she met Hugh. She had always liked Caroline better than any physiotherapy student, but they had drifted apart when she gave up her course. Neither was a letter-writer and Sally had imagined Caroline married to the doctor to whom she was engaged, and gone with him to England. To have rediscovered her in this town was bliss indeed. She poured it all out to Hugh as they lunched.

'And I suppose she's beautiful and charming and good, like all your friends . . .? You must introduce me to this paragon, but at the moment I want to talk to you about business. Could you come to my office after lunch, and see

the whole account, and exactly what money will be left when everything's paid off?'

'I suppose I could, but you've spoilt my day. . . . It was such fun shopping, and meeting Carol made it perfect, and now you're going to send me home thoroughly depressed, and I'll have to face up to telling Matt the worst.'

But it turned out better than she expected. Hugh had guarded her interests very well, and, although the amount remaining was not large, it ought to buy some sort of property where she and Matthew could live.

'A good house and section in town. No use trying to do any more farming. Matt's beyond it and it's too much for you. You'll get a good job, and Matt can garden.'

Sally shook her head. 'He'd be miserable. I've quite decided what to do. We want a farmlet where the land isn't so expensive and where we can grow fruit and keep a market garden. Matt's got his pension and I can manage a little place. I don't mind how small it is. Better to be small, because I don't want to be bothered with housework.'

'But that's not your sort of life. I can't see you in that kind of place.'

Sally swallowed. She was secretly dreading making a new start, parting with all her friends; but there was no choice. She had made up her mind and told Hugh so.

'You realise that, if you put your money into any kind of training, you could earn a good salary at the end of it?'

'Yes, and have Matt gardener to some hateful people who wouldn't care how his leg hurt as long as the herbaceous border was weeded. Nothing would make me.'

He said, too didactically, 'You're making a very foolish mistake,' and she was angry at once. 'Hugh, you've been awfully good looking after everything, but that's finished now and I've only got to pay your bill. By the way, where is it?'

'That, my dear, is slightly offensive. You put me in my place, don't you? My bill? Don't be an idiot, Sally. There are a few expenses that you'll have to meet, but not a bill from

me. In the popular phrase, it's been a pleasure,' and he smiled very kindly at her, but met no answering smile.

'Hugh, I can't do that. It's frightfully kind of you, but I don't want charity.'

'You excel in offensiveness this time. Charity? What about friendship? Be a little generous, Sally. Would you like to be paid for a few interviews with a bank manager, a few letters to a mortgagee, and fixing up a sale? You're good at giving. Have a go at accepting graciously.'

'But what have I given you?'

He hesitated, and then said with a smile, 'Some very good times, and I hope they're not coming to an end. Don't run away from us all, Sally.'

She laughed and shook her head, but there were tears in her eyes. 'Thank you, Hugh. I won't go on arguing about the bill. You've been very good to me. As for running away, it isn't exactly that; it's just . . . just . . . ' and then that brightness that was near to tears came into her eyes again and she got up and said with a smile, 'But now I really must run away because Caroline's coming out for the night. Oh, isn't it marvellous that Uncle Aloysius has gone and Carol's come, and everything's looking up, even money, thanks to you?' and she waved him a gay goodbye.

He sat at his desk for some time after she had gone, his papers untouched before him. He thought of her gallant independence, her difficult circumstances with a sum of money that in his eyes was pitifully small and an ageing and partly crippled man on her hands. Yes, she had courage and gaiety and charm. Then what was holding him back? He shook his head, partly in disapproval of himself, partly in doubt of his true feelings, and turned back to his work.

Sally drove home quickly in her old car and burst triumphantly into the shed where Matt was mending a gate. 'Everything's all right, Matt. Uncle Aloysius has gone off with his fairy, and there's enough money for us to get a little farm, and Caroline Layton's in town and she's coming out for the week-end.'

He looked up, disguising his immense relief in surliness.

'If it's enough for that, it's enough to set you up in some sort of business. And who the hell's Caroline Layton?'

She laughed and explained, but he turned sourly away. 'Now you'll be at it again, tryin' to marry her off to Simon, instead of thinkin' of yourself. I'm sick and tired of your bein' so smart. You ought to remember you're a lady.'

But he could not puncture her light-heartedness to-day. 'Wait till you see Carol. But, Matt, how did you guess about Simon? No one must know, because this time I'm going to be frightfully careful. Oh, isn't it heaven to be without Uncle Aloysius?'

Caroline arrived at the farm before dark and already Sally had put in a reckless toll to tell Alice about her arrival. 'You'll like her, and so will Trevor. And Alice, you'll be sure to bring Alister tomorrow night, won't you?'

'Oh thank you, Sally. He does so adore parties. Are you sure he won't be in the way?'

'Of course not. He and Caroline will make the party.'

Alice sighed as she came from the telephone. It was not so many weeks ago that she had said to Trevor, 'Sally and Alister made the party', but things had not gone as she had hoped. Certainly people had tried to take Sally up, but she had taken to declining invitations, because, she said, she could not return them. Vainly Alice had tried to convince her that people asked her because she was an asset at a party, always gay and spontaneously amusing. But the other day she had startled Alice by saying, 'What's the use? I'll soon be going right away, and how I shall hate leaving you and Alister. Trevor too, of course.'

Alice was deeply opposed to this new plan. She could not picture life in this town without Sally. And what had happened to Hugh Davenport? She had been sure that first night that he was in love with Sally, but she supposed that he was not the type of man who would allow himself to care for a penniless girl. Worse, an unconventional girl. Alice decided without more regret that he was not the man for Sally.

Caroline arrived in good time for dinner, and at once won Matthew's grumpy old heart. She was a happy and natural



person as well as a beautiful one, and immediately threw herself into all Sally's interests, sympathising with her difficulties, laughing over Uncle Aloysius's fairy, and even managing to see some architectural charm in the gazebo. But she was devastated to hear that this reunion with Sally would be so brief.

'Surely you could find something to do here? Receptionist in a doctor's rooms? You'd be good at that,' but Sally shook her head gaily and said she would only muddle up the appointments. When they were alone she explained the problem of Matthew.

'But don't let's talk about worrying things. Come out and look at Trigger in the morning and go for a ride. I wish there was a hunt near here. He jumps divinely, though he's old.'

'I'll love that. I want to buy a horse now I'm within reach of the country. That's my sort of life. Father will shout one if I write pleadingly. But oh Sally, I do wish you'd stay near here.'

Sally laughed and said that she and Matt were going to have a most adventurous life, and wondered privately why, so suddenly, the determination had come to get away from this place she had always loved.

Caroline thought, 'It's the same Sally, the one who threw up everything when her father died because it was her duty to come here. How she would hate to be told that she did her duty, but that's her trouble—she will try to do everybody else's, as well as her own. She hasn't changed.'

But Sally thought that she had. Otherwise why did she not feel the old enthusiasm for Simon's cause? What girl could be better than Caroline who was already planning to buy a horse so that she could get out of the town? She would be exactly right for Simon and Luthens. This time there would be no hitch; they would be married, Simon would keep his job; they would live happily ever after. At which desirable conclusion to her plans, Sally was furious to find a lump rising in her throat and told herself that she was mean and jealous. Just because her own future was a trifle grim at the

moment, she had lost the power to rejoice in other people's happiness. Sally asked Caroline to set the table and made gravy with great concentration.

The next day was fine and sunny and Caroline spent some hours on horseback, exploring the farm and riding along the road that led to Luthens. 'And did you meet anyone interesting?' Sally asked, for if fate had been kind Simon would have come riding along to meet her.

'Yes, a farmer who was very depressed about the pig market, and two men who insisted on giving me tracts. Oh yes, and a very nice young man who told me all about his hoggets. They've got worms.'

Sally sighed. Never mind; they would meet tonight, and she would make sure that she and Caroline were invited to Luthens on Sunday. This time she would be very careful, for at all costs Simon must not see her hand. He had been really unpleasant last time.

The girls had a hilarious time preparing for the party and Sally was delighted with the appearance of her large old sitting-room. There was only one flaw. Archie was late. This was a little worrying, because it was Saturday evening and there were always celebrations at the village pub then. As the sailor was leaving on Monday and had made many friends, these were likely to involve him deeply. She said to Caroline, 'He's a perfect pet, but he does have a little drink sometimes, and then he's rather silly. I'd hate him to give people a bad impression because Hugh and Simon have always been critical of my having him here. We must get him to eat a very large dinner when he comes in.'

Matthew was wandering about uneasily. He had grown attached to Archie and dreaded the idea of his making a disastrous last appearance. 'They'll be here before we know where we are, and Arch'll likely have had one over the eight, and they'll say "I told you so". . . . There's his motor-bike now, but just look how he's weavin' in and out of the cattle. . . . My Gawd, he nearly hit that one. . . . Yes, Arch has been on it all right.'

This hardly did justice to Archie's condition. He was, for

the first time, regrettably intoxicated and very pleased with himself, refusing the offer of dinner with a magnificent gesture. 'Never shpoil a party with eating beforehand,' he advised them owlshly. When Matthew tried to urge the point, he became annoyed.

Sally said quickly, 'Don't have any if you don't want it, Archie, but I made that favourite apple pudding of yours, and it's rather disappointing.'

That was enough. Indeed it was too much, for the sailor at once became alarmingly sentimental. 'How's that for a sport? That's the girl what's made a home for a lonely sailor,' and with infinite pathos he shed a few maudlin tears.

This was too awful. Matthew and Sally exchanged glances, and Sally said hurriedly, 'That's all right, Archie. We've loved having you and we're going to miss you.'

But this appeal to his heart was irresistible and he shed more tears, ending in a devastating hiccup, after which he told her that she was his little old lady and he would never forget her. Then, drawing himself up, he said with great dignity that it was the parting ahead that had upset him, and fortunately did not hear Matthew's comment that it was the partings at the pub that were the trouble. After which he withdrew to the bathroom to hide his emotion, and, Sally hoped, to put his head in a basin of water.

He had hardly closed the door when they heard the sound of approaching cars, and Hugh, Simon and Aunt Dorothy entered almost together. It took all Caroline's charm and friendliness to tide over an awkward moment for Sally felt slightly distracted. From the bathroom there came no sound and from the outer darkness another car bore down and Judith and Ian entered with an unconvincing air of having met at the gate. Next, the Moores arrived with Alister, and the room seemed very full indeed. Sally found herself dreading the moment when the door would open and Archie appear, filled with immense bonhomie. She managed to murmur to Matthew, 'Go and see how he is. Help him to pull himself together,' but Matthew was back in a couple of minutes and signalled to Sally to come into the kitchen.

'No go. He's dead to the world. In the bath with all his clothes on.'

'Oh dear, won't he drown?'

He looked exasperated. 'There ain't no water in it,' he said, and added that he had locked the door and people had bloody well got to powder their noses somewhere else.

Sally felt that she could trust Matthew to handle the situation and gave herself up to enjoying her party. It was delightful to see Caroline's instant success. Everyone liked her. Simon talked to her with unusual freedom, and Hugh watched her with approval and admiration. Sally felt proud of her friend and was amused to see that even Alister gazed at her with rapture, lashing her severely with his tail, and even trying to climb onto her knee.

Everything was going well, and Sally was being very gay and amusing about the farm she and Matt were going to buy, when, unfortunately, Alister withdrew to pay brief attention to the gazebo, and on his way back stopped and listened with his head on one side at the bathroom door. From within came steady snores and Alister felt uneasy. Someone was in trouble behind that door. He must give the alarm, and at once he set up a loud barking which caused a sudden startled silence in the sitting-room.

'What's the matter with that damned dog?' asked Trevor, as usual.

'Oh dear, I'm so sorry. Do you think it could be a rat, Sally?' and Alice would have gone out to collect her erring dog if Sally had not said quickly, 'Oh, don't bother. I know what it is. We've had trouble with our hot water pipe in the bathroom. It—it sort of gurgles.' At this there was a short explosive sound from Caroline, instantly turned into a cough. Sally went on, 'We're getting a plumber, but I've had to lock the door tonight, so I'm afraid you'll have to wash your hands at the kitchen sink. Isn't it a bore?'

Simon got up at once. 'Let me have a look. I'm quite good at plumbing. . . . Where's the key, Sally?'

It was Caroline who saved the situation by saying, 'Oh, not now, Simon. This is a party and you're not dressed like

a plumber,' in which effort she was supported by Matthew who remarked firmly that it wasn't no good, he'd broken his only wrench. Simon subsided with reluctance and Sally avoided Caroline's eye with great firmness. But it was impossible to continue a party with a full-sized Labrador baying in the passage, and Alice half rose. Sally said quickly, 'Don't go, Alice. I'll open the door and show darling Alister that there's—there's nothing terrible in there,' and there was urgent appeal in her voice. Alice had no idea what was the trouble, but instinct prompted her to leave it to Sally. She turned and very sweetly asked Judith to tell her how the library was going. Caroline began to talk rather loudly to Simon about the prospect of buying a horse, and Aunt Dorothy settled down to an interesting discussion with Dr Moore as to the rival merits of knitting or crocheting for psychiatric patients. Sally slipped from the room and closed the door.

Alister was now beside himself. Something was dreadfully wrong behind that door and nobody but he cared. He was scratching at the worn paint and growling when Sally put her hand on his head and unlocked the door. Then she took a deep breath and stalked in.

Archie was snoring blissfully and apparently finding the bath comfortable. Sally kept Alister close to her side and took her lonely sailor roughly by the shoulder. 'Get up, Archie. Get up at once. Pull yourself together and get out of that bath. . . . See this big black dog? He's fierce and I'm going to set him onto you in one minute if you don't rouse up.'

Alister, ready to oblige as always, leant over and licked Archie's ear. The sailor opened his eyes, saw the large black head close to his own, and let out a gasp of fright.

'It's the devil himself and he's after me,' he whispered hoarsely, and with a stupendous effort got to his feet.

Afterwards Archie said repentantly to her, 'I dunno whether it was you or the dog. I've never seen you angry before, and it must have been because it was pretty dark in there, but the dog's eyes looked red and sort of fiery.'

'Oh Archie, and it was only Alister. But he did the trick.'

'He did. One moment I was over the rainbow, happy as



could be; the next I was stone cold sober and mighty ashamed.'

Whatever the impetus, Archie did as he was told. He pulled himself together, put his head in the basin of cold water, and presently tip-toed from the bathroom and shut himself quietly into his room. From this he emerged half-an-hour later, quite sober, very tidy, and determined to make amends. A little sheepishly he made his way to Caroline's side, and, after her first slight start of amazement, she rose to the occasion and turned the full battery of her charm and beauty on him. This, combined with the proprietary interest and open admiration of Alister, who evidently thought that he had raised this strange man from the dead, made him a very popular figure. Mysteriously, both Simon and Hugh were put slightly in the background and the sailor became the success of the evening.

'Nice chap. You'll miss him, Sally,' said Trevor, and Simon told him that he had better say goodbye to the sea and take a job on Luthens. Matthew beamed forgivingly on him and even Hugh made a point of asking about his ship. But it was Caroline who set the seal on his success by asking in a puzzled voice, 'But no one has really explained how you came to this particular place, Archie.'

This was Archie's chance; his chance to atone for his deplorable conduct and to amuse Sally's guests. With immense verve he described the letters he had received from his little old lady, how he had come to look for someone like his granny—and found Sally. Everybody laughed and Sally thought, 'It's all right. He'll go away happy and forget the bath.'

But Archie did not forget, and next day made a very humble and shame-faced apology. 'Slippin' you up like that, after all you'd done for me, and just when it mattered. Can't think why you took the trouble to come in and get me out of that damned bath.'

'I wanted them to see you. I wanted them to realise what my lonely sailor really was like.'

'Not much to be proud of. Making a fool of myself and nearly of you.'

This wouldn't do. He must go away happy, like Uncle Aloysius with his fairy. She said, 'I don't agree. You've done a lot, Archie—made the gazebo and got rid of Uncle Aloysius and kept Matthew quite jolly when he would let himself be. Do forget last night. It wasn't a tragedy. It was really rather funny, and anyway no-one knows anything about it except us four.'

Not for worlds would she have told him that, when he said goodnight to her, Simon thanked her for the party and then murmured very gently, 'But don't think for a moment you took me in. Noises in the pipe, indeed. Sally, you're really the happiest liar I know.'

Sally had angled successfully for an invitation to Luthens, whispering to Simon that it would give Judith a chance to see her husband. 'But Caroline's staying the week-end; will it be all right if I bring her too?'

Her expression was so guileless that, after shooting her one suspicious glance, Simon told himself that he was a fool. At least he had managed to teach Sally that one lesson; in any case, this girl was far too dazzling to look at a mere farmer.

They picked Judith up and drove to Luthens in brilliant autumn sunshine. Sally explained that Judith had other friends at the station and dropped her before they reached the house, at a spot near which she saw Ian hovering. Aunt Dorothy was delighted to see them and obviously impressed with Caroline's charms. She spoke with great appreciation of the previous night's party and particularly of Sally's lonely sailor.

'A charming young man. You'll miss him sadly. I was only sorry he came home so late that we had only a few of his amusing stories. Sailors are so refreshing.'

Simon, a watchful eye on Sally, said that he had heard that Archie was a very popular character in the village and doubtless his friends had detained him. Sally agreed brightly but sat close to Aunt Dorothy and refused to move when Simon later suggested that Caroline should have a look at a horse one of the hands wanted to sell. 'A fair jumper, but wants schooling. Have you ridden much, Caroline?'

Sally at once began to boast of her friend's prowess and ended with, 'Yes, you go and look at him, Carol, but I'm not coming. It would make me too envious. My hunting days

are over unless there's a mild little turn-out where Matthew and I are going.'

'Where are you going, dear? Simon was telling me only last night what a mistake it was for you to move away from this district.'

'Simon thinks this place is Eldorado,' Sally said sharply. 'I've not decided yet, Aunt Dorothy, but I've heard of a little farm, about fifty acres; there are ten acres of orchard and grazing for about six cows, as well as Daisy and Trigger, of course. So we'll be able to send a little can of cream to the factory and Matt can grow vegetables, because the town's quite near. I think I'll try hawking them round the houses.'

Caroline laughed and Aunt Dorothy tut-tutted, but Simon asked, 'Where's this place?' and, when Sally told him said, 'But that's two hundred miles away.'

'That doesn't matter. The climate's supposed to be good and the soil's easy. Matt and I have got to be practical.'

He got up abruptly, saying, 'Well, if we're going to look at this horse . . .' and they went out.

It was a pleasant afternoon and Sally was loath to go home. There would not, she thought, be many more visits to Luthens. The others were evidently enjoying themselves, for Simon and Caroline did not put in an appearance for a long time and Judith was invisible. It was five o'clock and the early dusk was falling when they dropped her at her library and drove home.

Suddenly Caroline said, 'I like your Simon Hunter, Sally. So straight and honest, and obviously very good at his job.'

'Yes, he's a dear. I've known him all my life.'

There was a silence, and then Caroline said, 'Look here, Sal, we've always been straight with each other. You won't think I'm butting in if I ask you a question?'

'Of course not. Fire ahead.'

'Is Simon—well, is he your property?'

'My property? Good heavens no. Why should he be?'

'Only that he seems to know you so well and be so taken up with your affairs.'

'That's because he knew my father and all that. Sort of

brotherly act. That's all Carol. I give you my word.'

'Then' let me go the whole hog while I'm about it. Who's your particular bloke, Sal? You must have one. You're far too fetching not to have found one in these three years.'

Sally laughed. 'Oh, there've been odds and ends, of course. Nothing serious. Sorry to disappoint you, Carol, but I'm heart-whole and heading for being a spinster.'

'What rot. . . . Well, the catechism isn't finished yet. What about that rather fascinating lawyer with the superior air? What about Hugh Davenport? Let me see if you're blushing. . . . Not a sign. You're hard to please.'

Sally swallowed and said, 'I like both Hugh and Simon, but there's no need to keep off the grass with either of them. But Simon ought to be your cup of tea, if you like the country.'

'Of course I like the country, and I like your Simon too, but it's no use talking as if either of them's likely to fall for me. You don't know how attractive you are, Sally, and, if they've really stayed heart-whole, I shan't upset them.'

They were continuing the argument when they were halted at their last corner by the sight of a car at the side of the road, and a man sitting dejectedly on the bank beside it. Sally pulled up, as she always did at the sight of trouble, although few people knew less of the interior of an engine than she. But the man looked miserable and it was a lonely road.

'Are you having trouble?' she asked, jumping out. 'I'm not much of a mechanic, but I can always shove.'

He got up slowly and removed his hat. She saw that he was old, with plentiful white hair, a straight mouth and hard dark eyes. He looked ill, and she said in alarm, 'Have you been trying to crank or something silly?'

He smiled but his face was pale and drawn, and he sat down hurriedly. 'Nothing as foolish as that. As a matter of fact, I stopped because I was feeling—well, a little queer. There's nothing wrong with the car, and presently I'll be all right and able to get in and drive again.'

Sally was deeply concerned. In the uncertain light she could



see now that his face was rather grey than white and that there was a bluish tinge round his mouth. She said, 'Oh, you mustn't do that. My house is just round this corner. If you'll trust my friend to drive your car—she drives very well—then you could come home with me and have a rest. Are you going far?'

'According to directions, about another ten miles.'

'Well, you don't look fit for one mile now, but you'll be all right when you've had a rest, and then you can go on.'

'You're being extremely kind, young lady, but really . . .' and then, as he got up, he staggered and would have fallen if Caroline had not put a strong young arm about him. She said, 'I'm not exactly a nurse, but something in that line. Sally's right. Better not to drive while you're feeling like this. Go back with her and I'll bring your car,' and, with Sally on the other side, they helped him into the car.

He did not protest now or indeed speak at all, but leant back with an air of exhaustion that alarmed Sally. She started the car at once, saying over her shoulder to Caroline, 'You can manage, can't you? You used to be able to drive any car?'

'Yes, I'm all right. You hurry home and I'll keep close behind.'

Sally glanced at her passenger. His eyes were closed and he looked very ill. She must get him home and ring a doctor at once. As she pulled up, Matthew came out, irritable as usual because she was late and he had been anxious.

'What have you been up to now?' and then, catching sight of her passenger, and seeing Caroline drive up in a strange car, he said softly, 'My Gawd. More trouble. . . . Who've you picked up this time?'

Fortunately, at this moment Archie came out and she explained in three sentences what had happened. The sailor was quick in an emergency. He helped the sick man inside and onto Uncle Aloysius's vacant bed, and then produced a bottle of whisky.

'No brandy, but this'll do,' he said.

The visitor was making a great effort to pull himself to-

gether and said faintly, 'You are enormously kind. . . If you would feel in my pocket, there is a bottle of tablets which will help. I have already taken one, and the whisky will finish the trick.' In a second Archie had read the label, put out the tablets, brought water, and was pouring a good dose of whisky which he held to the bluish lips.

'Thank you. I can manage.' He sipped it slowly and swallowed the tablets, and in a few minutes his face was less grey. He said, 'It's passing. I'll soon be able to drive and trouble you no more. . . . This is quite an outrage.'

Sally said quickly, 'Nonsense. It's nothing, and you can't drive tonight. I'm ringing the doctor now. . . . Are your friends expecting you? Should I ring them too and explain?'

'Nobody's expecting me. It was a surprise visit. But I can't stay here. Quite impossible,' and he lay back, exhausted with the effort of arguing, but with an obstinate look on his face that suggested he meant to have his own way.

Sally was already at the telephone. The doctor lived at Queensville and she was fortunate to find him at home. She came back saying, 'He'll be here in a quarter of an hour, and you're not to move till he comes.'

He smiled rather grimly but said, 'I've forgotten how to take orders, even from a charming girl,' and would have tried to rise if a sudden return of pain had not made him gasp.

Sally was firmness itself. 'You're to do what you're told, whether you're used to it or not. Stay quite still and don't talk nonsense.'

He said, with a little humorous twist of his hard mouth, 'A long time since anyone has taken the liberty of telling me I'm talking nonsense.'

'Then it's quite time somebody did, because you're just being obstinate. And don't feel we're strangers. My name's Sally Leigh and I own this farm—at least I did till a week ago, but it's sold now. We haven't to leave for a month, though, so there's plenty of time for you to get well and strong.'

This time the smile was more spontaneous. 'My dear young

lady—a month! I shall tell the doctor to send me straight to hospital.'

'Well, we won't argue about it. We'll see what he says. Just lie still and remember you can stay here as long as you like.'

Outside the door Matthew was listening balefully, and he turned on her as soon as she reached the kitchen. 'Stay as long as you like. . . . You gorn mad again? Wasn't the old bastard lesson enough for you?'

Sally gave a sort of hysterical giggle. 'Matthew, how can you? What about the Good Samaritan? And he's not a bit like Uncle Aloysius. He—he was unique.'

'Maybe, maybe not. One minute the house is a bloomin' looney bin, the next it turns into a bloody hospital. Pickin' people off the road. . . . I don't like it . . .'

The doctor was emphatic. 'He should be all right now but he oughtn't to be moved for a day or two.'

At this the invalid protested angrily. 'If you think I'm going to let this young lady in for. . . . What the hell do you think I am? A down and out? Send me to a hospital and be done with it.'

Sally thought, 'He's an old snorter. How his eyes flash! I wouldn't like to cross him.'

But the doctor, who had had a quiet word with Sally outside, was unimpressed.

'I'm not sending you to hospital. It's full to the doors and you don't need nursing. You only need rest, and Miss Leigh will see that you have that. Damn it, man, what's the row about? You're not going to kill anyone by staying here a couple of days, but you might kill yourself by moving now.'

The old man gave a grunt of baffled rage and might have continued to argue if Sally had not put a kind little hand on his arm and said, 'Now, don't fuss. We want you to stay, really we do. It's going to be fun having you, and you'll be all right in a day or two. Just drink the rest of that whisky and stay quiet and don't get so cross with the doctor. Getting cross is frightfully bad for people.'

The doctor laughed. 'That's the method. . . . I'll leave these

tablets with you, and tomorrow, when the chemist's open, I'll send some more. By the way, what's the name?'

The man on the bed glowered up at him. 'Joseph Fraser, and why Joseph I don't know. My father should have given me a good Scottish name.' The doctor grinned and said goodbye.

Sally remonstrated. 'Oh, but Joseph was a dear; so kind and forgiving to those horrible brothers.' Then suddenly the penny dropped and she repeated, 'Fraser . . . Fraser, did you say? You aren't Ian's father by any chance? You weren't on your way to Luthens to see him?'

'I'm Ian's father all right, and I was going to Luthens. Do you know my son?'

'Yes, I know Ian. I know quite a number of the men on Luthens,' said Sally confusedly. 'The manager's an old friend of mine. We've been to Luthens today.'

'So you were coming from there? Did you by any chance see Ian?'

'Only in the distance,' said Sally carefully. 'But he was here at a party last night.'

'And you know the manager? Ever hear how the boy's getting on?'

'Only that Simon thinks the world of him. He said the other day he rather wondered why he'd come there to learn farming, because he knows all about it.'

A grim smile of pleasure came into Joseph Fraser's face and he said, 'He's not a bad boy, and he knows his job. But he's obstinate. Will have his own way. . . . And now I've come to ask him to come home again.'

'Really?' Sally thought of Judith. What would this unlucky pair do if Ian was snatched away to some distant farm and Judith left with her little library? She said, 'I expect you want him on your own place. I know he loves it and will be glad to go. Is it. . . . Is it because you're not so well? Oh, I do think he should be there to help you.'

The old man turned his head aside and said slowly, 'Pretty humiliating, isn't it? To come whining to your own son. . . I thought I was good for a long time yet, and that the boy

would come to his senses, but lately . . .' His voice trailed off.

Sally said quickly, 'Oh, but you can have him home and then take things easily, and of course you'll be good for years and years. Long enough to see Ian really settled and have lots of fun with your grandchildren.'

Joseph Fraser frowned. 'Grandchildren can wait. I don't believe in early marriages. Ian's only twenty-seven. He'd best hang off till he's thirty.'

'But why on earth . . . ? I don't agree with you one bit. Twenty-seven's quite old enough to know your own mind. Thirty! Why, you won't be nearly such a nice grandfather if Ian waits till then. You won't *enjoy* them.'

He smiled unwillingly. 'How you harp on grandchildren, young lady. . . . Well, I suppose they could be an interest to an old chap when he's no good for anything else.'

'Now you're being dreadfully depressed, and it's because you're tired. I'm going to get Archie to help you to bed and then you'll have something to eat and go to sleep. We can argue about grandchildren tomorrow, but tonight you've got to rest,' said Sally with a pretty little air of authority, to which, to her own surprise, the old man yielded, though unwillingly.

Archie went at once to help the invalid, but Matthew was behaving badly.

'Sooner him nor me. No bloody children's nurse for me. What the hell did you want to bring him back here for? It's always something. Last night Arch performing in the bath like a blasted seal, and now you runnin' round waiting on another old geezer when we've just got rid of one.'

'Matthew, I'm surprised at you. You've always been such a help to me before and now . . .'

He could never resist that tone of voice and said quickly, 'You're wearin' of yourself out with all these people. If it was you and me quiet now . . .'

'Yes, it'd be lovely. But Matthew, it's frightfully important for me to make friends with Mr Fraser. Come out into the wood-shed and I'll explain.' And there she told him the whole story of Ian and Judith.



'The old curmudgeon, with a nice young girl like that. . . . So that's what you're after—minding other folks' business as usual. . . . Oh all right. I'll suck up to him too, and get his blasted case out of his car and wait on him . . . ' and he went off muttering, but resigned.

Archie was quick and tactful with the invalid, and soon he was very comfortably in bed and Caroline, who had been busy at the stove, produced just the right kind of meal for a sick man. But he scarcely touched it and said apologetically, 'I'm a grumpy old wretch, Miss Sally, but a man hates weakness. It's not much fun to feel you're done and have got to come cadging for help. I suppose a man oughtn't to feel that sort of pride.'

'But it's natural, only not with your son who loves you. I'm going to sit down here and talk for a little, on condition that you eat that beautiful omelette. Ian will want to come home, though he'll hate you to be ill.'

'My son who loves me? I'm not so sure of that. I've been a hard father, and it ended in a row. Tried to manage his life for him, I suppose.'

'Well, fathers are like that. Mine was perfect, but he *would* borrow money and make himself poor so that I could have a career, when I'd far rather have been at home with him and Matthew. Ian will love to know you need him.'

There was silence, but Sally was glad to see that Fraser was eating his meal. Then he said, 'Do you know Ian well? I mean, are you friends?'

'Only in a sort of way. I didn't meet him till Simon took over the managership. But I like him, and he's talked about his home.'

'Told you he had an old tyrant of a father?'

'No. He did say you had prejudices—but then he has too. He's like you.'

He smiled grimly. 'Perhaps that's the trouble. . . . And an old man can be wrong. Times are changing. People are marrying younger, and sometimes it turns out well enough.'

'But of course it does, as long as they're not teen-agers, which must be difficult. People who marry ought to be young

enough to grow like each other. If they're young, it's easier to—what's the word?—to adjust themselves. And then they have children before they're too old, so that they can understand young people.'

'Before they're too old. Perhaps that was it. Perhaps I was too old. . . . Well, Miss Sally, I've eaten all I can of this delicious omelette, and now I'm going to do what you said—go to sleep. And tomorrow, if that damned doctor lets me, we'll send for Ian. Meantime, I'm going to think over about this marrying . . .' Then, with a sudden inspiration that was only too obvious, 'What about you? Tied up with someone, I suppose—a pretty girl like you?'

Sally felt this was the moment for frankness. 'No, I'm not tied up, but I wouldn't do for Ian, so don't start thinking about that. Think of those grandchildren instead,' and, with a friendly little pat on his old wrinkled hand, she picked up the tray and went out of the room.

Next morning the doctor declared the patient much better, but said he must keep quiet that day and put off seeing his son for another twenty-four hours.

'No excitement or discussions. It doesn't matter, Miss Sally, if you go in and chat with him. Get up? Certainly not till I see you again. When? Tomorrow if I've time.'

To Sally he said, 'He's just avoided a coronary, but he's going on all right. You can manage, can't you?'

'Of course. I've hardly anything to do.'

Caroline had had to leave early for her hospital and Archie's plane left in the evening. He had sold his motor-cycle and Sally was to drive him in to the air-port. He was spending his last day putting finishing touches to the gazebo, convinced that it had had a good deal to do with the sale of the farm.

'I saw the bloke looking at it for a long time, and he says to me that he's never seen anything like it.'

Sally could well believe it, and was glad Archie had not heard Mr Gardiner's comment to her, 'Some good bits of timber there. They'll come in handy to mend the yards.'

They drove in sadly, after a last drink with Matthew and a touching farewell. They were going to miss him and she wondered whether she would ever see her lonely sailor again.

'You'll write, won't you, Archie, even if I'm not your old lady? Then I can let you know where Matthew and I go, and there'll always be room for you if you can get away from your ship.' One invitation which she knew Matthew would not resent.

'Too sure I'll write, and if you're near a port, I'll be able

to look in when we're berthed there. It's been a good time and I'll not forget it.'

'And you've helped us. It's people like you who don't take life too seriously who make things go,' and she sighed as she thought of the censorious Hugh, the lugubrious Matthew, and the fierce old man in Uncle Aloysius's bed.

She stood watching till Archie climbed into the plane. He paused at the doorway, sketched a salute, and was gone. She felt sad and lonely and knew that the next month was going to be beset with difficulty. She turned and left the aerodrome, squaring her shoulders and telling herself it was no use moaning. It had to be lived through. All the same, as she was in town, she would spare ten minutes to call on Caroline and then run up to the Moores'. Mr Fraser was all right under Matthew's reluctant but conscientious care. As Caroline's flat was on the road from the air-port, she would go there first.

But, as she was driving slowly along, looking for the right number, she saw Caroline on the other side of the street. She was passing under a light at the moment and Sally thought how beautiful she looked, with her graceful carriage and her small head. She was just going to sound the horn when she paused. She had not noticed that she was with a man, but now he too came into the light and she recognised Simon. Her hand came quickly back to the wheel without sounding the horn, and she accelerated. They had not seen her. They were talking animatedly, entirely engrossed in each other.

To her fury, she found that tears had come into her eyes, so that she could hardly see the street ahead. When she was safely past the strolling pair, she pulled up, fighting a new and quite strange emotion. Actually she imagined she felt a stabbing sort of pain. It must be indigestion. Then, with her usual honesty, Sally said, 'Indigestion nothing. It's jealousy. They looked so happy, and you grudged it to them, just because you're not very happy yourself. How I despise you. It was what you wanted, what you planned, and it's going splendidly. . . . Simon hasn't wasted any time, and he was looking at her as if. . . . And Caroline would never lead any

man on. Yes, at last things are going right, and it's only you who are wrong.'

Having read herself this lecture, Sally decided that she would still go up the hill and see Alice and darling Alister. Nothing, she thought, would be so comforting after parting with Archie—and of course that was what was wrong with her really—than the feeling of that strong black head under her hand.

Alice was delighted to see her, but Sally regretted that there were so many things she wanted to tell her friend but mustn't. She described their rescue of Joseph Fraser, but had to keep Judith out of the story, and so couldn't tell Alice how she was turning his thoughts to grandchildren. Nor did she want to discuss with her friend her plans, or absence of plans, for the future. However, she talked very gaily for ten minutes and petted Alister so much that he got quite above himself and tried to climb onto the piano.

She said, 'There's nothing so nice as a dog when you're feeling rather miserable,' then, very quickly, 'it was so sad saying goodbye to my lonely sailor. He's been such fun. . . . But I must go. . . . No, darling Alister, not that bag. I know you love it and you did get it once, but I want it tonight.' Then, leaving her love for Trevor and kissing Alister's head, she went out to her little car and drove home to her two difficult old men.

Sally had rung Luthens that morning and told Ian about his father. 'He was coming to see you and make it up. . . . Yes, he'll be all right. . . . No not today, but the doctor said you could come tomorrow for ten minutes. . . . No, no trouble at all. He doesn't need any nursing and Matt and I are alone now. . . . Yes, he hinted at it to me. I'll get round to Judith soon and everything will be all right, Meantime, I'm turning his mind to grandchildren,' and she laughed as she hung up the receiver.

When Ian arrived next day he was shocked at his father's appearance, but wise enough not to show it or refer to their quarrel. He said casually, 'Funny your landing on Sally. I haven't known her long, but she's a great kid.'



'For once I agree with you. A great kid. Now, if you were to find a girl like that. . . .'

'Sally wouldn't look at me. There are plenty of others in the offing for her.'

'Sure to be. A pity. She'd make you the right sort of wife.'

'But, Dad, you wouldn't even meet the girl I wanted. You just hit the roof at the idea of my marrying anybody—at least, for a long time.'

'Don't exaggerate. I said till you're thirty. You're nearly twenty-eight now. No use trying to make yourself out a chicken.'

Ian laughed. 'You may be sick, but you seem in pretty good form. Well, the doctor gave me ten minutes, and they're up. You'll be all right. I'll come home, and be damned glad to, as soon as I've given Simon a fortnight's notice. He's a very good chap and understands. So long, Dad. Keep your chin up.'

'It's not my habit to do anything else. . . . I warn you, it'll be pretty dull on the farm. No woman to look after us. Since I've been here, with this girl waiting on me, I've missed your mother a lot. Childish, of course, but a man gets like that when he's sick. No help for it.'

Sally, coming into the room, said briskly, 'Of course there's help for it. Ian's wife will be a very nice girl who'll look after you both and keep you company. Then, remember those grandchildren? You'll be fit as a fiddle when you're a grandfather.'

'I see no reason why I should be,' he said, smiling unwillingly, and then bade his son goodnight as Sally led Ian firmly from the room.

'It's coming right,' she said as she saw him off. 'Just tell Judith that I'm working on him.'

Matthew was in the kitchen, looking disapproving. 'I heard you. Now, I don't fancy that old chap in there. Very bossy and gives himself airs, but all the same I'm sorry for him. I know you when you work on people. All I can say, is, Gawd help him.'

Sally had asked Judith to come for the night and Ian brought

her to the door. She told Joseph Fraser casually that Judith ran a library and could only stay the night. 'But you'll like her, though she's rather quiet.'

The invalid was feeling bored with bed and quite pleased to have more company. He eyed Judith with approval when she came in; a nice girl and not flighty. They chatted easily and she told him about her library. 'Yes, your son belongs. A lot of the Luthens men do.'

Presently he said, 'I can't think what's wrong with the men here. Three pretty girls like you and Miss Sally and that friend of hers who's at the hospital, and none of you married, if you'll excuse my being personal.'

Judith hesitated and then said recklessly, 'As a matter of fact, I am married.'

'What?' at once the tone was less cordial. 'Another of these separations, I suppose. Married young and found out you didn't care for each other.'

'Not at all. We weren't particularly young and we care for each other very much.'

'Then, why the devil . . . ?'

'A case of family interference,' she said quietly, and changed the subject firmly.

Joseph Fraser was frowning heavily when Sally came in with his supper. 'That girl you've got staying here—who is she?'

Sally hedged wildly. 'Judith? But I introduced you properly. . . . Now, drink this while it's hot. Then you must go to sleep. No more visitors tonight.'

He said, 'Queer business about her husband. Must be a poor sort of chap to let his family interfere. No guts. The girl's better off without him.'

'Perhaps. . . . But don't talk any more tonight. Those pills ought to be working soon. You look miles better.'

'Of course I'm better. Perfectly well. That doctor's a fool.'

Sally laughed. 'I'll bet you always say that about anybody who disagrees with you.'

'Well, I won't start arguing with the young lady who's been so good to me. Perhaps saved my life. I suppose I was

heading for an attack. Might have had one if I'd gone on driving.'

'Well, you didn't, so it's no use thinking about that. Ian's coming at lunch-time tomorrow. They're not very busy and Simon says he can spare him for an hour or so.'

Judith went back to her library without seeing Fraser again. When Sally went in to him in the morning, he was looking alert and clear-eyed and said, 'The trouble's over. I've been like this before. No need for the doctor to fuss. I can move today.'

'Not very nice of you to want to dash away the minute you're better. Why not take a day sitting quietly in the sun, if the doctor says you can?'

'All very well, but you don't know what a nuisance I feel, descending on you like this and needing nursing.'

'You didn't descend on us. We brought you here. And you haven't needed any nursing.'

He smiled at her very kindly. 'Do you always say that? Collect waifs and strays and look after them? Do you insist on trying to do things for people?'

'Not any more. I always make a mess of it. I don't have any luck with other people's business. That's why I'm so pleased about you. You're getting well and I haven't mixed anything up for you.'

'You certainly haven't. I only wish I'd a chance of paying it back.'

'Oh, don't feel like that. Don't always want to pay back.'

'Well, a chap likes to feel he can make a bit of a return. After all, you didn't even know I was Ian's father. I might have been any down-and-out.'

'If you were, you'd converted a very good car,' she said laughing, and went out.

When Ian arrived, she warned him to keep the conversation to the home farm, and to their future plans. Joseph was restless and said he oughtn't to impose like this but get away as soon as possible.

'But where can you go? I live in the men's quarters at Luthens and you can't drive far.'

'I can get to that village and there's a hotel there.'

'A poor sort of show, and they don't cater for boarders. Mostly bar trade. Sally would be hurt if you made off there. She's very hospitable.'

'To everybody, I should imagine. . . . Why is she selling this place?'

Ian told him and he listened sympathetically. 'Nothing anyone can do, I suppose? I'd be willing to lend a hand. She'd be a good risk.'

'Don't suggest anything like that. She'd be furious. She won't take from anybody.'

He moved restlessly. 'There ought to be something one could do in return.'

'Don't let that worry you. Sally's always doing things for people.'

But it did worry him, and later, when Ian had gone and Sally came to sit with him, he said, 'One good turn deserves another. I'm grateful to you, Miss Sally, I'm lying here cudgelling my brains as to what an old buffer can do to show it. . . . Now, don't look haughty. It isn't your style. Tell me something I can do. It would make me happy.'

Sally took the plunge. 'There's only one thing. . . . You and Ian have made it up, haven't you?'

'Well, we haven't quite staged a reconciliation scene. Men don't. But we understand each other and I don't think there'll be too many more rows.'

'There might be one.'

'What do you mean?'

'If Ian wanted to marry, and you made a fuss and tried to put it off. Such a lot of rot. . . .'

'What next? You're a very daring miss to say I talk rot.'

'Sorry, but you know you rather do. Because Ian isn't a boy. He's nearly twenty-eight—and I think he's in love.'

'I've heard that one before. He was in love a year ago. He got over that. Now I suppose he's in love with you, and this time he shows more sense.'

'I do wish you wouldn't keep harping on me. Ian's not the least in love with me.'

'More fool he. Then I suppose it's that pretty girl who helped pick me up?'

'Caroline? Good heavens, no. They've only met twice'; and then Sally reflected that it had only taken two meetings for Simon to fall in love with her beautiful friend. She reiterated, 'No, it isn't Caroline.'

'Then I suppose it's that quiet girl, Judith. . . . But no; it can't be, because she said she's married. A pity. He seems to let all the good girls go. He's pretty changeable, too. Swore black and blue he'd met the only girl in the world a year ago. It just shows how right I was to say he didn't know his own mind.'

'So now you feel you were right all the time?'

'Well, wasn't I? Why, anyone would have sworn from what he said that this girl would wait.'

The moment had come for Sally to fling her cap over the windmill. 'And what if she did wait? What if it's the same girl?'

'But this girl's married. Don't tell me Ian's started hanging round a married woman. . . . I suppose that's it. She didn't want to wait, and married someone else, and now . . . But she said she loved her husband.' If he had not been such a fierce old man, Sally would have thought that there was entreaty in his sunken eyes.

She put her hand on his. 'Now, please, oh please don't get excited. It'll spoil everything if you're ill again, and it's all very nice and happy and simple.'

'It may be happy, but I'm damned if it's simple. What are you trying to tell me?'

'If you wouldn't shout—and it's so bad for you—I'd tell you that Judith and Ian are married.'

There was a moment of complete silence and then Joseph Fraser said, 'Then why the hell didn't they say so?'

It was so unexpected that Sally laughed. 'I like that. How could they? You quarrelled with him and turned him out and, because he's obstinate like you, he went straight ahead and married Judith; but she made the condition that they wait till you come round. She won't run the risk of making



you ill. So you see what a dreadful old tyrant you've been.'

'I see what a cunning plot this has been. You get me here and soften me up and show me the girl—and I must say I liked her—and then break it gently. I might have known there was some reason for picking up a stranger.'

'That's perfectly horrid of you, and what's more, it isn't true,' cried Sally, her eyes blazing. 'I didn't know who you were till the doctor asked your name. It wasn't a plot. I'd have done the same for anyone. Why I never thought of not taking Archie in, or Uncle Aloysius, fairies and all. And then, when I found out you were Ian's father, of course I wanted it to come right because it's so silly for people to quarrel and make each other unhappy, and . . .'

She was almost incoherent with emotion. Joseph Fraser suppressed a smile and spoke in a different voice. 'Well, my dear, I was wrong. I apologise. There you are—is that what you want? I'm an ungrateful old bastard.'

'Oh no you're not. That's Uncle Aloysius,' said Sally, laughing now. 'But how could it be a plot? Why you were comfortable in bed before we knew who you were.'

He gave a short bark of a laugh. 'I imagine that's your way—help people first and think about it afterwards. . . . Well, what now?'

'You did say you wanted to do something for me, though of course there's no need at all to, but . . .'

'Precisely. Yes, of course I'll give them my blessing. Nothing else to do, is there? I suppose they can take time to come along and see the old man tonight?'

Ian made his second visit that day, but this time he brought his wife with him.

When they had gone, radiant with happiness and planning how to get rid of the library as soon as possible and return to their future home, Joseph Fraser said to Sally as she brought him his supper, 'Well, now that's all over, the fatherly blessing bestowed and all that, there's one thing you might do for me.'

'Anything,' cried Sally ecstatically. 'Oh, anything.'

'Just the damn silly sort of thing you would say, little

Sally. . . . Well, just sit down here and tell me what the devil you meant about Uncle Aloysius and his fairies. Were you raving or did I hear you wrong?’

Sally sat down and then with immense gusto she told the story of her great-uncle.

Three days later, Joseph Fraser was driven by Ian to his wife's cottage. Sally protested that he was leaving far too soon and that she and Matthew would be dreadfully dull, but all the same she saw him off with a happy wave and said to Matthew, 'Isn't it queer? Alone again after all these weeks.'

He was touchy at once and said, 'Dull, that's what you'll be. No one to make a fuss of you. No lonely sailors or obliging old geezers to tell you how clever you are.'

'Well, at least you won't make that mistake. But of course we won't be dull. We'll be too busy finding somewhere to live and getting packed up. Have you looked carefully at yesterday's advertisements?'

They studied them together, but there seemed nothing suitable. Next day Judith cycled over and hurried into the kitchen looking excited.

'What are you doing away from your library at this hour? People will be saying, "She isn't bothering now she's come out into the open and let on she's a married woman";' for the news had spread quickly and now people were saying, 'What did I tell you? I knew she wasn't that sort of girl.'

'They can say what they like, but they can still change their books, because Mr Fraser's sitting in state in the library, waiting to bite off anyone's head if their book's overdue. It'll be a change for them. But, Sally, we've had such a splendid idea. Why go away? Why not take over my library? There's a living in it, and you could buy that paddock at the back for your horse and cow, and Matthew could make a good garden. Then everything would go on just the same. . . . I'd love you to have my books, because I won't have room for

them at the farm, and I don't want them. Everyone says it's a marvellous plan.'

For one moment Sally's heart lifted. To give up this desperate search for a home; to have one ready-made, close to all the people she cared for; not to have to start again. As Judith had said, 'Everything would go on just the same.'

Then she took a deep breath and spoke slowly. 'You're a darling, and it's like you to want me to inherit the library you've made. But I think it's far better for us both to get right away from here, from where I've been rather a failure. . . . No, Judith, but thanks awfully. It would be marvellous in lots of ways, but something tells me it wouldn't be really happy in the end.'

What told her that? What said that you didn't go on just the same? There would be so many changes. Caroline would always be her friend, and so would Simon, but when your two close friends have fallen in love, you must become an outsider. And Alice had Trevor and Alister; although that friendship meant so much, there was no permanent place for Sally. As for Hugh—well, there had been a time when Sally had imagined a particular warmth and friendship from Hugh, but that seemed to have faded a little. He was kind and pleasant when they met. Even a few days ago they had had tea in town when they happened to run across each other, but there was some difference here too. Everywhere, suddenly, Sally seemed slightly on the outside.

Judith pleaded and argued but Sally's mind was made up, and she went away disappointed. 'We all thought it was the most wonderful inspiration. Don't definitely say no, Sally. Think about it.'

That evening, when she and Matthew had talked it all over and he had agreed, she thought with some reluctance, that the library was not their future, she was surprised to hear a car and to find Simon at her door. He was on his way to town, he said, going to see this film that everyone was talking about; but what was this that Judith had just told him? Why wouldn't Sally do what they all wanted and settle into this library job? It wasn't much of a snip, perhaps, but there

would be a living in it, and, if Matthew wasn't content with the garden, there would be plenty of jobs he could get in the neighbourhood. It was far better than this mad idea of going away to a new place where they would know nobody.

Sally felt unreasonably irritated by his insistence. He was obviously going to take Caroline to the film; he was very well dressed and looked pleased with himself. She was in an old faded frock with a darned cardigan and no make-up. All this made her say snappily, 'Oh, for goodness' sake let me make up my own mind. It's no one's business but mine and Matthew's. We know what we want. A library wouldn't be my cup of tea at all, and I'd never make a success of it.'

'Of course you would. Everybody here likes you and would give it a good run.'

'You mean, everybody's sorry for poor Sally who's a failure, and so they'd come and pay sixpence for a book and help her along? No thanks.'

But he would not leave it at that. 'But you'll be so lonely. All your friends are here.'

'We'll make new ones.'

'I'm sure you will, but we'll miss you, Sally.'

This did not soften her. 'You'll get along . . . and what a lovely let-out for you! I've run away and left you. No need to jilt me. You'll be in the clear.'

He glared at her, his eyes hard and angry now. 'If that's what you think,' he said, 'if that's how you feel . . .' and without another word he turned and left the house.

They listened to his car drive away and then Matthew said slowly, 'Pretty tough, wasn't you? Oh well, that's that.' It sounded like a knell in her ears.

The memory of Simon standing there so well-dressed, on his way to a film, offering her what she thought was easy patronage, spurred her on and from that moment she threw herself into the job of finding a farm for Matthew and herself. She spent money and time on several excursions, travelling by trains or bus because she would not afford the petrol for the car. The fifty acre farm she had read about proved hopeless, and she regretted the waste of time and money spent in



visiting it. Why did advertisements sometimes tell such lies?

It was the first of many such excursions, and for a fortnight Sally saw nothing of any of her friends. But still she had met with little success. Small properties were hard to come by anywhere and had mostly been offered for sale because their owners could not make them pay. She began to feel rather hopeless.

Matthew saw it and said a little timidly one day, 'You wouldn't think of taking over that library? We'd know what we was in for, and we might make a go of it.'

But Sally shook her head. Her failures had made her more determined than ever to solve her own problems. She said, 'I'm going to see a place tomorrow that the land agent told me about. It's a long way away and I'll have to stay a night. Will you be all right? This just might be possible.'

He assured her that she needn't worry about him, but she thought he looked older and rather lost as she drove away and left him. It was a long, tiring journey by train, but Sally made friends with an old man sitting next her who knew the district and was able to tell her about the land. This cheered her and she told him so.

'Do you know, I was beginning to feel depressed, and I do think self-pity is bottoms, don't you?' she said when he got out at a station before her own.

He thought her a very nice girl and offered to help in any possible way. Sally thanked him and wondered what it was in her appearance that made people always want to help her nowadays. She hoped to Heaven she wasn't looking pathetic. Once she had been the helper, and had collected lonely sailors and mad great-uncles with the greatest ease. She sighed as she pulled down her suit-case and got out.

But it seemed as if the encounter had changed her luck. The little farm she had come to see was not hopeless. The cottage was small but the land was easy and fertile; there were the remains of a large vegetable garden, a well-kept orchard, and a paddock in good grass. The little village was rather like Queensville and not far away—and the place had the advantage of being two hundred miles from the farm

which she must cease to regard as home. She would get the train back tomorrow, and bring Matthew in the car to see for himself. Tonight she would have the excitement of sleeping in a bed she had not made and eating a meal she had not cooked.

Neither the bed nor the meal was first-class, and Sally had a restless night. Now that the time had come to make a decision, she found it very difficult. Was she selfish to take Matthew away from the people and place he knew? Would she have been wiser to accept Judith's offer, to stay there contentedly, watching Simon's happiness, making an occasional trip to town to see dear Alice, and perhaps having lunch with Hugh until he found another girl to entertain? She knew that she was popular in the district and could make a success of the library; people would come, not only to borrow books, but to see her. Simon and Caroline would often be there, and she would know that she had helped to bring about their happiness.

But at this moment Sally sat up in bed and said aloud, 'No, I'm not going to do it. If Matthew likes it, we'll come here, and I'll ask the agent to give me an option for three days. We'll know by then—and, once I leave, I'm never going back to that part of the world.' At this moment there was a rap on her wall and a slightly intoxicated voice said mildly, 'Wake up, dearie. You're talkin' to yourself.'

She laughed, and put her head down on the pillow and went to sleep.

When she arrived home next day Matthew met her, looking anxious. 'No good?' He did not seem immensely cheered when she said, 'I think this one might do. But of course you must see it. We'll take the car and go there tomorrow,' and she went on to tell him all about it, making it sound cheerful if not very attractive.

'And I met a dear old man in the train,' she said, but Matthew cut her short.

'Now, none of that. We've had enough of these here old men. Time you learnt better,' and they both laughed as they had done in happier days.

Seeing with relief that he had cheered her up, Matthew went

on, 'And Mrs Moore's been ringin' like mad. She's coming on again at five because I said you'd be back then.'

Alice was reproachful. 'Where have you been? None of us has set eyes on you for weeks.'

'Looking for a new home, and I rather think I've found it,' said Sally with bravado.

'Oh darling, why will you go away when we all want you to take Judith's library?' asked Alice sadly, but Sally laughed this off and countered it by asking how Alister was, and what mischief he had been up to lately.

'Oh, he's much better; hardly ever destroys anything. . . . What was that, Trevor? Well, if you will leave your slippers about. . . . But Sally, do come and see for yourself. That's what I rang about. I'm giving a party tonight—just a little one for your special friends. . . . So it couldn't be a party without you.'

Sally hesitated. It was just what she didn't want—to have it rubbed in how much she liked these people, how she would miss them. Alice went on to explain that it was just Judith and her husband, Simon and Caroline, Hugh Davenport, and Sally herself. 'A little farewell and happy ending to Judith,' she said. Mr Fraser was to spend the night at Luthens, under the care of Aunt Dorothy, so it would be just a young people's party.

'But I don't feel a bit young. I spent the night in a horrid pub and I didn't sleep well. Really, Alice, I don't think I'd be much use at a party tonight.'

But Alice was hurt. Sally could tell that from her voice. 'But none of us has seen you for ages and we miss you. I couldn't give a party without you. Do you remember the last one when naughty Alister took your bag? Oh, you simply must come.'

And Sally saw that, unless she was going to cause a silly fuss, she must. She thought, 'Anyway, it'll be a chance to say goodbye to them all, and Matthew and I can get away without anyone saying they'll give us a farewell.' Aloud she said, 'Of course I'll come, if it's only to see you and darling Alister. But I won't stay late, Alice, because I really am tired,

and deadly dull, and Matthew and I have to set off first thing to-morrow to see this place.'

'How I hope it falls through. . . . Sally, what am I going to do without you?'

'Much better,' Sally thought as she replaced the receiver, 'than I'm going to do with you. You've got Trevor and Alister and I expect you'll have a baby pretty soon. I'm not needed in your life, or in anyone's, except Matthew's.'

But this was not the mood in which to go to a party, so Sally put on the pretty frock that Alice had made her, and then remembered the stole Archie had brought for his old lady. She put it round her shoulders and actually looked in the glass with some pleasure. She didn't look unhappy or unwanted; she hadn't the appearance of odd man out. She looked what she meant to be—the life of the party.

Even Matthew was impressed, or perhaps he just realised that she was a very unhappy girl and could do with a little praise. He said, 'Not bad, that thing of Arch's. Your Dad would be pleased, the way you look tonight.'

This was the highest praise Matthew could offer, and Sally gave him a little grateful pat and said, 'Tonight I won't be late. I don't feel like it. We've got to make an early start, so I'll be back in good time. But don't sit up for me.'

She always said it, and it was never any use. He would sit up. He said, 'What's the sense in cuttin' it short? You have a good fling.'

They were all there when she arrived, and Alister almost knocked her over with his welcome. They gathered round her and said, 'Where have you been hiding? We've missed you,' to which Sally replied gaily that she had been farm-hunting, and gave a spirited description of some of the worse places she had seen. 'But I think I've got what'll do, and Matthew and I are off to see it in the morning.'

It was Trevor who asked, 'Not too far away, Sally?'

They were silent when she said it was very far indeed, and told of her trip by train; but she made a funny story of it all and prided herself on giving nothing away. Presently the group broke up and she found herself alone with Simon.

She asked, 'How's Luthens?' and was hurt when he replied perfunctorily and soon went across to join the others. There was something going on over there. Sally heard a burst of laughter and then Ian's voice, 'Congratulations, old chap. You're damned lucky.'

Of course he must be speaking to Simon, and at once Caroline said, 'Where's Sally? She ought to have been the first to hear because it's all her work. Come over here, Sal.'

She went across at once, smiling very brightly, and said, 'I think I can guess,' and was puzzled when it was Hugh who replied and said, 'I'll bet you can't, because you've been hiding ever since it started, hasn't she, Carol?'

Sally stiffened and for a moment could not think of anything to say. Then she faltered, 'But—but what do you mean?' Her voice sounded strange and she pulled herself quickly together and said, 'Do tell me. I'm quite out of touch. You make me feel a back number already. What's happened. Don't be mean.'

Caroline put an arm round her and said, 'Sal, surely you guessed when I asked . . . You see, Hugh, I was dreadfully afraid you were Sally's property, but when she disowned you quite scornfully, why then . . . then.'

'To bring this affecting scene to a close,' Hugh said in a carefully unemotional voice, 'Caroline and I are engaged.'

'Surely,' thought Sally, 'I'm horrified. Surely this is what they call a body blow? Oh how selfish I am not to be heart-broken for poor Simon. It's awful for him. But he's taking it so well; if he can face up to it, so can I;' so she cried in the gayest possible voice, 'Oh Carol, how good you'll be for him. You'll keep him in his place, and how he needs it!' and everybody laughed.

She had no clear recollection of the next few minutes. She only knew that she talked and laughed a great deal, but suddenly she felt as if she was suffocating. She was over-tired; she oughtn't to have come; she thought, 'This stole of Archie's is too hot,' and threw it down on the sofa. But still her cheeks were burning and she could not look at Simon, for fear the pity showed in her eyes.



But how could Caroline do it? She remembered the evening when she had seen them walking down the street; she thought of Simon as he had come into her kitchen, so happy and well-dressed, off to take Caroline to a film. . . . Caroline had always played fair before. It was utterly out of character. Now Simon had been bitterly hurt for a second time.

The heat in the room was oppressive. She must get outside for a few minutes and cool her burning cheeks and collect herself. For a little time she must be alone until she could still this curious turmoil of feeling which she did not understand. Presently there was an opportunity, for someone suggested dancing, and they began to lift the carpet. Thereupon Alister sat down like a rock in the middle of it. Trevor said, 'That damned dog,' and hustled him off. With an injured glance over his shoulder Alister came to Sally, and together they slipped through the French window into the garden. It was cold, but Sally did not feel it. She sat down on one of the gay little chairs and the big dog put his paws on her knee and gazed into her face. With a little sob Sally put both arms round his neck and buried her face in the glossy neck.

A minute later she felt a hand on her shoulder and heard a voice, 'Sally, don't,' and knew that Simon was there, looking down at her. She said, 'I can't believe it.'

His voice was very gentle as he bent over her. 'I know. I'm dreadfully sorry, but cheer up. Hugh's behaved damnably, but he was never good enough for you.'

Sally raised her head and stared at him in the half dark. Then she gasped, 'Hugh's behaved damnably. . . . Why? What's he done? Oh, of course you mean because he's stolen your girl. I know, but it's Carol I can't understand.'

There was a silence and then Simon's voice, sounding very strange, 'Stop hugging that great brute,' and, when Sally clung the closer to Alister, Simon leant over and unclasped her fingers. Then he actually gave Alister a push and shoved him out of the way. The big dog for once in his life gave a low growl, and Sally said indignantly, 'How could you? He was being so comforting.'

But Alister knew when he was not wanted. He turned his

back and stalked away, and Simon took both Sally's hands and said, 'Why were you crying? You were fond of Hugh, weren't you, and it was a shock to hear of his engagement?'

Sally tried to pull her hands away and answered with spirit, 'Don't be so silly. Of course I'm fond of Hugh, but not like that. It was because of you I was crying—and because I'm so tired and everything. . . . Oh, I know how you must be feeling. First Elizabeth Gray and then Caroline.'

'What the hell has Elizabeth to do with this, or Caroline either? Sally, are you raving?'

At those words something strange happened to Sally, and her heart, which had been so heavy for a long time, suddenly felt light as air. She said, 'But—but you were fond of her, weren't you? I was sure you were fond of her.'

'Would you tell me why you thought that? What possible grounds could you have had for thinking I was fond of Caroline?'

'Well,' said Sally, beginning to feel rather foolish but unaccountably happy, 'there was the first time, when you were so long looking at the horse, and then two days after I saw you walking down the street after I'd seen Archie off, and there was the night you took her to that film.'

'What film? I never took Caroline to a film in my life. I've only been to one in the last six weeks and then I went with old Ford and his Missus—and tried to think up reasons why you hadn't come too. . . . As for walking down the street, I happened to have a message for Caroline about that horse, and met her when I was looking for her lodgings. Any complaints?'

'Don't be tiresome. Of course I don't mind how often you take people out, or how much you like them; what I mind is your thinking I was crying because of Hugh, when I was really crying for you. Oh dear, what a muddle it's all been.'

'And who made the muddle?' asked Simon sternly. 'Who said we were engaged when we weren't, and then tried to marry me off to any girl who appeared on the horizon when I'd found out I only wanted one girl. . . . And who tried to

run away from all the people who cared for her, and who's behaving like a little idiot now?'

'Simon,' said Sally with great dignity, 'You mustn't talk to me like that, even if you have known me all my life. I may have made a few mistakes in the past, but I've completely altered now. I'm going to be sensible and cautious and not get into any more fixes.'

'You certainly are not. Matthew and I will see to that.' Then he said casually, 'Matt will like Luthens, and there'll always be room for your lonely sailors and other pick-ups, and for Daisy and Trigger and Tip. . . .'

At that moment they heard a shout of 'That damned dog. Stop him, someone,' and then Alice's distracted wail. 'Sally . . . Sally, where are you? The most awful thing has happened. Alister's made off with your lovely stole.'

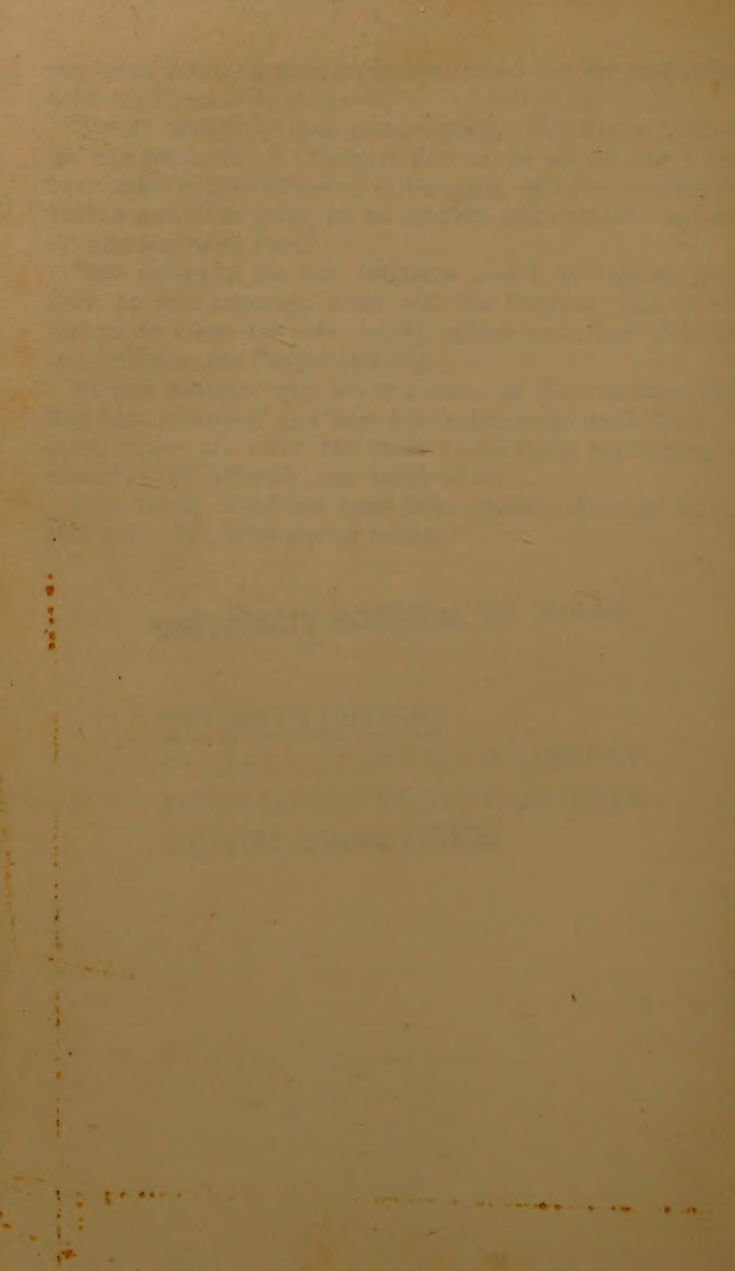
Sally barely lifted her head from Simon's shoulder to call back gaily, 'Oh, what does it matter?'

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